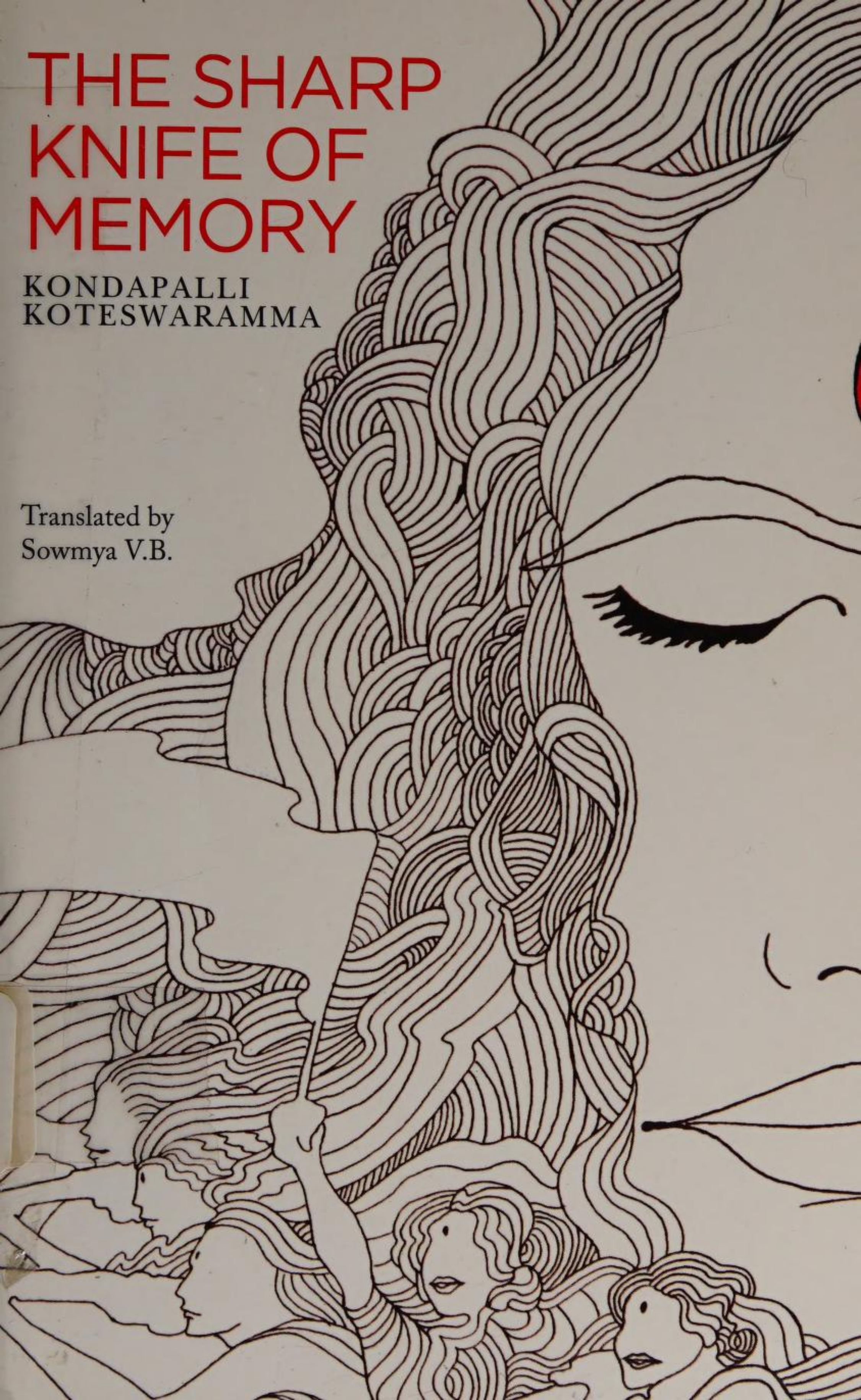
THE SHARP KNIFE OF MEMORY

KONDAPALLI
KOTESWARAMMA

Translated by
Sowmya V.B.



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THE SHARP KNIFE OF MEMORY

KONDAPALLI KOTESWARAMMA, ninety-five years old, is well known as the wife of Kondapalli Seetharamaiah, founder of the Maoist movement in Andhra Pradesh. She has been a political activist for many years of her life. She writes poetry and prose.

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In December 2012, when we first spoke about translating this book, I wondered if it would really happen. Several people worked along with me on the translation. I would like to thank Gita Ramaswamy for giving me this opportunity and for all the support throughout this period. Thanks to her, R. Srivatsan and V.S. Krishna for their editorial support and to Anuradha Kavuri, Sudha Kavuri and other family members of Kondapalli Koteswaramma for their occasional feedback on the draft. Thanks to Zubaan Publishers and Urvashi Butalia for making the book a reality.

This book had a strong influence on me personally. I thank Koteswaramma for writing *Nirjana Vaaradhi* and letting me translate it.

On the personal front, I would like to thank my friends Julia Krivanek and Alina Noveanu who, despite not knowing anything about Telugu or about Koteswaramma, still enquired regularly about the progress of this translation. Finally, none of the things I do are complete without mentioning my mother Geethamani, my brother Halley and my husband Sriram for their invisible and unvoiced support.

Sowmya V.B.

Preface to the Telugu Edition

These are some thoughts I want to share.

I am neither a famous person nor a writer. However, a few well-wishers were insistent that I write my memoir so that my story is known to a broader audience. People like Mahidhara Ramamohana Rao, Chekuri Ramarao, the poet 'Smile', Parakala Pattabhirama Rao and Manikonda Suryavathi encouraged me to write my autobiography saying, 'The courage of commoners too should be registered in the annals of history.'

My life is full of sad memories. Would I be able to express this anguish meaningfully on paper? I had no answer to this question and this is perhaps why I have been hesitant to write.

My granddaughters Anuradha and Sudha, and Vasantha[1] (who also calls me 'Ammamma' or grandmother) have also repeatedly asked me to write my autobiography while I am still active, to let future generations know my story.

I doubted if my age and my poor eyesight would permit it. 'If you ask yourself why you took part in several revolutionary movements and why so many of your friends suggested that you write your autobiography, the tears that roll down your eyes will write their own story,' they said.

Anuradha, her friend Vasu and Vasantha helped immensely in bringing out this print edition. Anuradha, in particular, worked very hard to give this book a good shape.

[1] Vemana Vasanthalakshmi is a senior journalist, noted commentator and editor of the several volumes of Balagopal's writings.

Volga, the feminist writer, agreed to write a foreword for the book almost immediately. She provided a historical background so that readers could appreciate my story better.

The Hyderabad Book Trust came forward to publish the book. Gita said, 'You were associated with four major movements that happened in our state: the social reform movement, the freedom struggle, the communist movement and the Naxalite movement. So, please write down everything you can remember.'

I have written as much as I can. Some parts have been added after being recorded by Vimala,[2] who came to Visakhapatnam for this purpose.

The story of my life appears as a book now with the help of all these people, in my 92nd year. I thank everybody for this.

If readers think that this story was written for a social good, I will be happy. If they think that the story contributes to the well-being of humanity, I can say that my efforts bore fruit and I will rejoice that my life had a purpose.

Kondapalli Koteswaramma
15 August 2012

[2] Vimala is a poet and writer.

Introduction: A Voice from the Margins

Gita Ramaswamy

When the Hyderabad Book Trust published Kondapalli Koteswaramma's autobiography *Nirjana Vaaradhi* in September 2012, we were unprepared for the overwhelming response. Admittedly, we had expected interest because Koteswaramma is the widow of Kondapalli Sitaramayya, the man who founded the People's War Group, the single most effective threat to the Indian government and most widespread in the nature of its influence on society. But the response had little to do with this, the book having sidelined Sitaramayya as it were. There was a reissue in a week and a second edition within two months. Readers overwhelmed us with their reactions, both on the telephone and subsequently through letters. We have published some 400-odd books over the last thirty-three years, several of them written by women, several others about women and many among them explicitly feminist, but the response to these from men has mostly been lukewarm, almost as if such books have nothing to do with them and belong to a constituency entirely separate from their world. *Nirjana Vaaradhi* proved this wrong. There was a flood of calls from men who said that they had wept several times while reading the book. They wanted to know if they could meet Koteswaramma or speak to her over the telephone. A leading journalist made a twelve-hour train journey to Visakhapatnam to meet her. An engineer working in the Tungabhadra project in Karnataka decided that tears were not enough; he would translate the book into Kannada. Three men from different areas purchased a hundred copies each, one distributed them to

the public libraries in his district, the others to their friends and acquaintances. One of them wrote to me:

> I shed a few tears reading some of the incidents in the book. Imagine being a child widow, married to a rebel with a cause, a freedom fighter, a wife deserted by the man she married, who ditches her for another woman, and a mother who lost both her adult children. This lady's life personifies a fusion of idealism, sacrifice, perseverance, resilience, patience, endurance, struggle, tragedy, suffering, selfless giving, forgiveness, hope and inspiration. Nothing could break her. She was down many times but picked herself up and moved forward. Like someone said, 'Tough times do not last, tough people do.'

A woman is often defined in terms of her husband. Koteswaramma has always been known as Kondapalli Sitaramayya's wife even after he left her. By writing her memoir, Koteswaramma defines herself, her life, her emotions, on her own terms. A woman of incredible grace, dignity and resilience, she is revealed not as a tragic figure, not as the wife who was abandoned for the lover, not as the mother who was rejected by her children for the father; she reveals herself as a powerful woman, a survivor with a strong core.

Koteswaramma was born in a rich peasant Reddy family in a village in the fertile Krishna delta of Andhra Pradesh in 1920. She was married when she was barely four or five to her maternal uncle, who died within a few years. Thus, she was left a child widow; yet, she did not know she was one, nurtured as she was in a caring family. She went to school and grew up in the heady days of the freedom movement. Her mother spun the charkha (spinning wheel), while some among her relatives discontinued their studies to jump full-time into the movement. Koteswaramma herself encountered Gandhi when she was barely ten, and along with other women, took off her gold ornaments and gave them to him.

She grew up in a time of extraordinary importance. The emerging nationalist movement was facing challenges, both in ideology and strategy from different movements—the communist, the socialist movement, and even a fledgling Dalit movement. The present-day states of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Telengana did not exist at that time. The coastal districts and the southern Rayalaseema ones ceded by the Nizam of Hyderabad to the British were part of Madras Presidency and governed from the city of Madras. Since the construction of the Cotton barrage in 1852 and a host of anicuts across the delta, this area became prosperous. Telangana, the eastern part, was part of the Nizam's state. The two regions—Andhra, then called the Circar districts, and Telangana—had very different trajectories. In the Andhra region, Western education had spread through the medium of English in schools and colleges set up by the British government and more prominently by Christian missionaries. There was a healthy growth in journalistic activity, and the first Telugu journal, *Satyadoota*, appeared in 1833, followed by several others. Several literary associations too were active, particularly in centres like Masulipatnam, Rajahmundry, Kakinada and Vijayawada, and they had numerous publications and activities. In this context, a social reform movement swept the 'upper castes' of the area. Veeresalingam made efforts for the remarriage of child widows and for the education of girls, while Gurajada Apparao supported him ably with his pioneering writings. The social reform movement in the Circars gradually meshed into the freedom movement.

Alongside a strong nationalist movement that produced leaders like Pattabhi Sitaramayya, Tanguturi Prakasam and Sarojini Naidu, between 1930 and 1932, radical elements in the Congress had begun searching for alternatives. At about this time, the seeds of communism were being sown in the coastal Andhra region. The communist movement and party formed the backdrop of much of Koteswaramma's life. Students

from AP who left the state to study began participating in the freedom struggle, mingling with radical elements in the Congress and studying socialist literature. By 1931, Chandra Rajeswara Rao, Nanduri Prasad Rao, Tummala Venkatramaiah and others had gone to Benares Hindu University and begun working in the Young Communist League. By 1934, Amir Hyder Khan and others had started branches of the Communist Party in Madras. Some others, like Sundarayya, were already members of the Communist Party by 1932. In Andhra, the party was said to have been founded in September 1934 when the Andhra Provincial Organising Committee was formed at a meeting of communist representatives from different districts at Vijayawada. Almost immediately, it was banned and remained underground from 1934 onwards. In 1942, when the communists supported the war effort after Soviet Russia was attacked by the Nazis, the British government lifted the ban.

Koteswaramma's family and the communists arranged her second marriage in 1939 to Kondapalli Sitaramayya, already a party worker at that time. The wedding sealed her lifelong bond with the communist movement. With her husband strongly approving, she began work as an activist. Along with Mahila Sangham activists, she took part in rallies, reproduced and sold party literature from village to village, and was an active member of the cultural troupe, besides caring for her two young children. Sitaramayya became secretary of the Krishna district unit of the Communist Party, an important post, considering that this district was the heartland of communist politics in AP. When repression on the party became severe, she went underground with several others for five years, from 1946 to 1951, the period coinciding with the peaking of the Telangana peasant movement.

Hyderabad state was going through a sea change in the late 1940s. It was getting rapidly communalized into Hindu and Muslim forces, and there was a crisis in governance.

All of India was involved in the nationalist movement and Hyderabad aimed to be independent. This gave space to the communists who organised the poor and middle peasantry suffering from rank feudalism. The Telangana movement (1948–51) was an armed revolt of peasants under the leadership of the communists against oppressive landlordism patronised by the Nizam of Hyderabad. The revolt started in 1946 in Nalgonda district and quickly spread to all of Telangana in around 4,000 villages. Peasant farmers and labourers revolted against local feudal landlords (*jagirdars* and *deshmukhs*) ruling the villages. The communist-led agitation was successful in liberating over 3,000 villages from feudal lords and 10,000 acres of agricultural land was distributed to landless peasants. Around 4,000 peasants lost their lives in the struggle, fighting private feudal armies. Hyderabad state formally joined the Indian Union in 1948 after a takeover by the Indian army.

While many men from the Communist Party moved between the two regions, those from the coastal region working in the squads in the Telangana area and women in the party were constrained and retained in their own regions. In 1951, the armed struggle was called off, and party cadres returned to an uneasy future. Fissures in the party had been growing after the calling off of the Telangana peasant movement in 1951. The party decided to downscale in a big way and sent its full-timers out to earn their living in different fields.

Those who have worked in radical movements but have been forced into inactivity due to various reasons face great unhappiness—a fact often not acknowledged. Nervous breakdowns and depression are very common. Those who leave are unable to return to their past lives and, very often, their families do not want them either. They are unable to become steady wage-earners due to lack of qualifications and experience, being too old for the job market and having a radical reputation behind them. Their personal relations remain in the shadow of the party or the movement where their friends were.

When they leave all this behind, there are few people to share their grief with. Their values of fighting for change, organising people, practising compassion and selflessness become out of place, and they find it difficult to accept the outside world's values of consumerism, commercialism and so on. What they need is time. Time heals and it gives them the ability to make the change, to attune themselves to fighting for change in the small world around them, to help others in their little areas, and to make the necessary compromises with the revisionist world around them. That this is an incredibly painful process is what has not been written about, and this is what we read in the silences of Koteswaramma's text.

Women revolutionaries particularly face serious issues when movements subside. The difference in their lives while in the movement and when out is far more marked. Women also invest more in terms of change in lifestyle and aspirations when they join a movement. This investment is not easy to discard later. While, in the long run, it may serve them better, the journey is fraught with sorrow and tension. Kondapalli Koteswaramma worked in the communist movement in Andhra Pradesh in the 1940s and was underground for five years, away from her native district, her family and her children. When she returned to Andhra Pradesh and to a life among family and friends, she faced not just the normal trials and tribulations of a former activist, but also the prospect of her husband abandoning her and her children being taken away, besides a financial crisis. In short, her world collapsed around her.

Kondapalli Sitaramayya's liaison with another woman (referred to as 'that woman' in Koteswaramma's text) led to his leaving his wife. The husband who had once gone on a hunger strike so that Koteswaramma would agree to act on stage in the communist troupe was now to turn against her. Sexual liaisons and extramarital affairs conducted by communist leaders and activists were not uncommon—an unhappy reflection of

what happens in society at large. What was uncommon was Koteswaramma's refusal to turn a blind eye to it. She steps very delicately here; she refuses to demonise Sitaramayya or comment on his callous attitude. Yet, her recital of facts and the silences between them tells the reader what could have happened. She recounts Sitaramayya saying, 'You were once a widow. Yet, I married you and gave you some recognition in society.' Her response to this in the book is only this, 'Those words hit me hard.' Others too castigated her. 'Some people called me a useless woman, citing the examples of women who put up with everything and stayed with their husbands for the sake of their children. It seems to me that people in distress are a source of amusement for the carefree.' The bitterness that could mark someone who has been so ill-treated by both husband and society is absent in this voice.

In 1957, Sitaramayya, who had been suspended from the party, ostensibly due to his extramarital liaison, but possibly due to intra-party politics, shifted to Warangal in the heartland of Telangana. He withdrew from active political life for a while. Koteswaramma began, in 1960, the painful process of rebuilding her life, studying for about five years, ironically in the hostel for destitute women that Durgabai Deshmukh had set up in Hyderabad.

Downscaling activist numbers told on the Communist Party. The Indo-China war in 1962 furthered deepened the fissure within the party, and in 1964, it split—there were now two parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the CPI (Marxist) (CPM). In the 1967 elections, the two parties together won only twenty seats and lost their position as main opposition to the Swatantra Party. They were virtually decimated in Andhra Pradesh. Its mainstay, the Kammas, deserted it on a large scale, and its foot soldiers, the Scheduled Castes, also switched over, almost entirely to the Congress.

The fire of Naxalbari in 1967 and the Srikakulam peasant revolt in 1969 were unable to restore the communists to

their position. This further weakened the electoral left. Charu Majumdar led many from the CPM to form a new group. In AP, Sitaramayya became the leader of this group, but that is another story.

Koteswaramma writes in some detail about this period because it was the most trying part of her life. She lost both her children, the son being killed and the daughter committing suicide after the sudden death of her husband. Soon after, her mother, Anjamma, who had been a pillar of strength for her, also died. Koteswaramma writes:

> My mother, who had performed my marriage, was dead now. The children born of that marriage were dead. It feels as if that marriage was a dream.... 'Is my life a dream? Or is it just a stream of tears? Can I really survive with this heart that burns?' I wondered.

Koteswaramma's mother had lost heart:

> Whenever I asked her [mother] to eat, she would say: 'I don't want to. Let me die before Karuna. I am tired of watching your miseries all my life. I have no energy to witness more.' When I responded saying, 'If you go away as well, who will wipe my tears?' She replied, 'You seem to live only to cry all your life.'

Besides her own family breaking up, Koteswaramma also watched the Communist Party split, which anguished her deeply:

> There is only one party according to me—the Communist Party. Even after the party split into CPI and CPM, I regularly sent the membership fee to both. Later, Sundarayya suggested that I stop this and said that it is better to contribute to society as a party member than just send membership contributions.... The Communist Party had now split into

> seven. Which amongst these seven will establish that equal society we had hoped for? Each May Day, they raise slogans saying, 'Workers of the world, unite!' But they never unite themselves. They fight among themselves. How, then, can the workers unite? Who will bring the revolution?...
>
> I moved on, doing what I could. When I once commented, 'What will I achieve staying alive?' Sundarayya had responded, 'Whether you serve the nation or not, you won't harm it. Such people too are needed now.'

Meanwhile, in 1991, an old and ailing Sitaramayya was expelled from the party he had founded. He now wanted to meet Koteswaramma again, as he had wanted to meet her earlier, but this time, his friends were insistent that she meet him.

> 'Is it enough that he wants a meeting? Shouldn't I too want to meet him? Since I don't, I won't come,' I replied....
>
> Three men who I respect as my brothers convinced me and took me to Sitaramayya. He cried as soon as he saw me. 'Why do you cry now? My eyes have become dry after years of crying for you, your children, your support, my food and shelter. Can your eyes still shed tears?' I said. That made him cry even more.... Tears rolled down my eyes too when I saw him cry.
>
> He wanted to live with me, but I dismissed the idea whenever someone broached the topic. It was one thing to accept him as a friend. Living with him was another.

At this point, the reader begins to wonder whose life has been tragic after all. The great leader who had inspired thousands of Maoists, only to lose dignity in the twilight of his life, abandoned by the very party he had helped found, or the woman who had been rejected by him and castigated by many, but had stood tall in the face of adversity?

Koteswaramma took up a job as a warden in a hostel and mentored many young girls there who recall her affectionately

even now. After she retired, she continued to work in yet another hostel, and in 1999, at the ripe age of seventy-nine, she decided to move into an old-age home set up by the CPI for retired comrades. There too she worked to take care of others.

> In the past, I had taken care of children. Here, they were older people. I did things like reading out the news for those who couldn't see clearly, serving coffee to those who couldn't walk to the dining hall, and helping with gardening.

When Sitaramayya died, Koteswaramma ruminated:

> So many thoughts jostled for space in my mind when I saw the body of Sitaramayya. He had spent so many years of his life for the movement, for people. In the eighty years of life, he had spent sixty as a revolutionary. When he was not in prison or did not live in exile, he had perhaps led a normal life for about twenty years. Why, then, did none of his party colleagues come to see him? Should they abandon him because he differed with them? Long ago, Sitaramayya had abandoned me, saying that I did not suit him. Now, his party comrades had abandoned him. Is this what life is about?

There were several women who are Koteswaramma's contemporaries—Indira Gandhi, Lakshmi Sehgal, Kalpana Joshi, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay and Durgabai Deshmukh, to mention a few. Twelve-year-old Durgabai also gave her golden bangles to Gandhi (as did Koteswaramma) when she encountered him at Kakinada. But all of them came from wealthy and privileged homes, and they were participants in the mainstream nationalist movement, which gave them opportunities to share in the new nation building. Koteswaramma's life was in stark contrast to theirs. Her rich peasant parents lost a major part of their properties, and with her joining the communist movement, it was a life of austerity for them. Yet, how gladly and deeply they identified with the

communist ethos can be gauged when Koteswaramma writes about what her mother said on her deathbed:

> I don't want religious rituals. Remember me in a memorial meeting in the tradition of your party. Inform people from both parties that Anjamma wanted them to work together. I have saved Rs 2,000 and given it to Vemuri Nageswara Rao. Take it from him and divide it equally between the two parties.

Koteswaramma's writing tells us of the movements, its lows and highs, the difficulties faced by ordinary activists, proving to be an archive of great importance. A world completely forgotten, the communists of yesterday seem dreamlike figures in today's fast, commercialised world. Koteswaramma points out to the strength in the figures and their failings too.

How did Koteswaramma pick the title, *Nirjana Vaaradhi* (A Bridge Abandoned)? One of her friends says, 'She has seen a generation before her and a generation after her and served as a bridge between the two. People have crossed the bridge and moved on in both directions. Now there is no one and she is a lonely bridge.'

> Am I not the only one left now as everyone who walked with me has gone away?
> Yet, my loneliness does not wish to stay alone in a corner.
> It weeps like the river Godavari when it hears of tragic events.
> It gets emotional when I think of my revolutionary past.
> It wants to preserve our past ideals for future generations.
> It gets satisfaction in writing about our past so that the present generation can read it.

This is the story of my life, full of sadness. This is the story that came out of my memories and became 'a bridge abandoned'. This is the story of Kondapalli (the family name that still remains) Koteswaramma's life.

How has Koteswaramma been able to write without rancour, without anger? One reason could be that she has had long lonely years to come to terms with her life. After Sitaramayya deserted her in the early 1950s, there was a long period where she learned to survive with grace without the umbrella of the Communist Party. In the early 1980s, women activists of the Stree Shakti Sanghatana in Hyderabad embarked on a project of interviewing women who took part in the Telangana armed struggle and the communist movement of that time. This resulted in the book, *We Were Making History*. Koteswaramma was one of the women they interviewed. With and after this book, she was drawn into the limelight and some activity, such as attending meetings and speaking at them. This was again followed by a prolonged period of reflection till 2010, when she began writing her autobiography. These long periods of solitude have possibly helped her to come to terms with the tragedies in her life and retain her serenity.

The tragedies in Koteswaramma's life reflect both the problems of an age and of the communist movement. As we read her account, we find that the history of the Left movement is almost entirely that of upper-caste Hindu men. Women enter it largely as the cooks, den-keepers, stenographers, copiers, artistes; Dalits barely make an appearance and the sole entry of Satyamurthy in the book reveals the antagonism he faced in this world. Christians, Muslims, Adivasis and other minorities do not appear, though Andhra Pradesh has them in probably a higher proportion than other states. This tell-tale upper-caste structure meshes easily into the freedom movement, and this culture of sharing public space reveals the close links between them as well as the vulnerability of the movement, which could cause it to be weakened later. For a long time, Marxist orthodoxy would give no room to discussions or readings about caste and its influence on Indian life till pressure from below was built up. We also note that similar pressure from the

debate on the issues of Muslims and Adivasis has led to the Left redefining its policies.

While Koteswaramma came out into public life because of the communists, it is also true that the problems that she would have faced if she had remained in the traditional domain also dogged her in the party. The Left, because its centre was upper-caste male, as in many organisations of the time, had yet to learn to work with, respect and listen keenly to the voices from the margins. While highlighting the great changes brought in society by the communist movement and also the institutionalised caring tendency that the party had towards its cadres, one also underlines the importance of self-correcting mechanisms in any party or group that works for change.

Koteswaramma's is the first unmediated voice from the women in the Left in Andhra Pradesh. While there have been several accounts in the form of articles and interviews with radical women, this is the first full-scale autobiography to have emerged from this section. That this had to come from a woman ninety-two years old, indicates the difficulty in 'speaking out', the difficulty in seeing the hurt on loved faces, faces of compatriots, family and friends, who would have preferred that some issues not be raked up in public.

Koteswaramma's voice from the margins will help reconstitute a politics that is both inclusive and expansive, to build a better world, a new world. We await a powerful pluralistic call that speaks of inclusivity, non-hierarchical organizational and conceptual structures, and an expansive vision of the terrain of political struggle.

REFERENCE

Stree Shakti Sanghatana. *We Were Making History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986).

A Bridge Abandoned

Some memories
bloom like petals.
Filling our hearts with fragrance,
they make us breathless.
Tears of joy
shine like pearls in our palms.

Some others
prick us like thorns.
Filling our hearts with sadness
they make us breathless.
Their piercing pain
Like a sharp knife in our hearts,
remains.

Dreams and aspirations have vanished.
Unwanted things falling all over me,
Fragmented, my life has become a haunting memory.
My heart is now a broken mirror.
These memories are stacks of those broken tiles...

****

As a child, I was surrounded by loving parents and relatives. I won many praises and prizes for song, dance and stage performances. I was made to feel special. My schoolmates did not like this. Perhaps they thought they were being treated as inferiors. On one occasion, a classmate remarked, staring at me, 'Her husband is dead. That's why she is so "special".'

When I went back home and asked my grandmother about this, she confirmed it. I had been married to my uncle Veera Reddy when I was about four or five years old. He died of tuberculosis within two years. Until that moment, I had not known that I was married and that my husband had died when I was young. I was a child widow. It was then that I understood the protectiveness and affection my family swathed me in.

I was born in 1920 in an upper-middle-class family. We belonged to Pamarru village in Krishna district. My mother was Anjamma and my father, Subba Reddy. I also had a brother, Venkata Reddy. I passed the fifth class with encouragement from my teachers and, upon their suggestion, my father sent me to high school. Apart from going to school, I learnt music at home, and sang Tyagaraja *kriti*s and verses from the *Ramayana* as well. My father loved to listen and used to ask me to sing for his friends. In school too, my teachers asked me to sing the morning prayer.

Those were the days of the freedom movement. My mother spun yarn on the charkha. Thammareddy Nagireddy, a law student and a distant relative, discontinued his education to participate in the freedom struggle. Our family had friendly relations with him and others who aspired for social reform.

CHILDISH PATRIOTISM

In 1931, when I was about ten years old, Gandhiji visited Pamarru. He was accompanied by Bhogaraju Pattabhi Sitaramayya and Kashinathuni Nageswararao Pantulu.[1] They were on their way to Bandar. My uncle, Nagireddy, invited Gandhiji to the village square. I had just returned from school and noticed that women had gathered near the stage. They were removing their ornaments and donating them to Gandhiji. Inspired by this, I removed whatever ornaments

I could from my body and placed them in his hands. Everybody stared at me as I came down from the dais. I felt that they were blessing me for becoming a patriot.

I came home excited, singing *Vande mataram*. But my mother was not happy. 'Forget the country's independence—you seem to be independent already. How dare you give all your jewellery away without asking us?' she shouted. My father backed me and retorted, 'Be happy that she has the magnanimity that we don't. Perhaps she felt that service to the nation is service to god.'

After that, Nagireddy uncle started teaching me patriotic songs. 'We should not learn songs praising Queen Victoria and King George V,' he told me and taught me songs like Garimella's *Maa koddee telladora tanamu* (We do not want this white man's rule), Chilakamarti's *Bharata deshamu chakkani paadiyavu* (India is a bountiful treasure house) and Basavaraju's *Sirulu pongina jeevagadda* (Our native land, which brims over with prosperity).[2]

When women freedom fighters visited our village, I used to sing with them, advocating khaddar and the boycott of foreign goods. Leaders like Vallabhaneni Seetamahalakshmi, Maganti Annapurnamma and Bharathi Ranga would organise meetings on the front porches of our houses. When Sarojini Naidu visited our village, I was asked to garland her. Thus, I played a part in events relating to the national freedom struggle. My classmates and teachers at school used to frighten me by saying I would be put in jail for singing such songs. The boys at school used to tease me, calling me 'nightingale'. I decided to stop going to school because of this. In spite of my mother's protests, I quit school when I was in the eighth class. My father, who supported me in this move, wanted to encourage spiritual thoughts in me, and asked me to write the *Ramakoti*[3] regularly.Reading the *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata* was already a part of my routine by then.

Our tenant, Mikkilineni Akkayya Choudhary, was a man both patriotic and keen on social reform. The teachers' union and students' union members of our area visited him frequently. One among them, Thammareddy Ramaswamy, was a friendly man who addressed my mother as *pinni* (mother's younger sister), and treated her with respect and affection. He complimented me, saying, 'When you sing these patriotic songs, they sound more beautiful than the poems from the *Bhagavata*.' He sought out new songs and encouraged me to learn them. I learnt songs like 'Bad times have begun, my people, arise! Let us strive for universal joy in the coming age' from him.

Since Pamarru was a *firka*[4] centre, it was a popular venue for many events and meetings on issues like liquor prohibition, the fight against untouchability, khaddar promotion and the freedom struggle.Women freedom activists would come with loads of khaddar clothes. I used to roam around with them and sing on the stage.

THOUGHTS ABOUT REMARRIAGE

As I mentioned earlier, my husband had died of tuberculosis. One of my relatives told Ramaswamy that my husband had left all his property to me and he had wanted me to remarry. I heard that my mother also wanted to get me married again and had asked Ramaswamy to help.

While my mother wanted me to be happy, my father was worried that our neighbours and others in the locality would pass remarks about my appearance and my marriage. They used to scare us saying that my fate could not be changed and that wearing flowers in my hair or vermilion on my forehead would bring bad luck to my brother. Thus, my father was worried that my remarriage could result in excommunication, and nobody would then offer their daughter's hand in marriage to my brother. He also had a lingering doubt that I would not get my first husband's property if I remarried. But my mother

was serious about it and their arguments on this issue became routine. I was afraid that the issue of my remarriage would turn our home into hell.

When I reached puberty, there was no traditional celebration and no relatives visited our house. My mother wept. Our tenant Akkayya Choudhary's wife consoled her, saying, 'Celebrating a girl's menarche is a thing of past. This is the age of educating our girls. You should stop crying and send her to school instead. Education is the future.'

THE HUNT FOR A GROOM

After this incident, I stopped wearing flowers in my hair and *bindis*[5] on my forehead. My mother too stopped in solidarity. It hurt me to see her do this even though she was not a widow. Ramaswamy knew what I was going through and encouraged me to read books on the regressive social customs of the day and their reform. With his motivation, my brother joined a students' union and began speaking in favour of my mother's point of view. Since there was a lingering fear that my brother may not find a bride if I got married, my mother decided that my wedding would take place after his.

I was known as a widow with a lot of property, so several people, some richer than us, came forward and offered their daughter for my brother. My family chose one of them as the bride-to-be. She came from close relatives on my grandfather's side. It was a five-day wedding, befitting our status. Thus, at the age of sixteen, my brother was married.

Now, there were many questions welling up within me: Would our relatives come to *my* wedding? Won't I face the wrath of my brother's wife's family if I marry now? Won't we be excommunicated? Could I be happy in a marriage that would cause so many troubles for my father and brother? I wanted to tell Ramaswamy that I did not want to hurt my

father by marrying someone in this situation, but I could not muster the courage to say so.

Perhaps Ramaswamy's friends knew about these efforts to get me remarried. They used to offer me vermilion and flowers when I visited their homes, saying, 'All these ideas of karma are nonsense. A lot of widows are now remarrying, having children and living happily.' A teacher called Ramabrahmam had married a widow, Tulasamma, and they had two children. They invited me to their house and asked me to hold their babies in my arms. They called me a soon-to-be bride and offered me vermilion and bangles.

One day, I overheard Akkayya Choudhary informing my mother that the teachers' union had decided to support my remarriage. My father also heard this and perhaps that is why he changed his mind. He visited Ramaswamy the next day and said, 'All of you are interested in my daughter's remarriage. Although I am afraid of the consequences, I think it will be good to get her married again with support from all of you.' My mother heard this and hugged me happily. As I agreed to marry again, I wondered, 'Why are my mother, father, Ramaswamy and his friends so worried about my marriage? I am not even Ramaswamy's sister.'

My father suggested that Ramaswamy find a groom from our own caste to avoid ruffling any more feathers in the community. Ramaswamy visited the political education classes conducted by the Communist Party at Mantinivari Palem in search of a prospective groom and learnt that there was a young man named Kondapalli Sitaramayya belonging to the Reddy caste. He found out that Sitaramayya admired Chandra Rajeswara Rao[6] and was an active participant in youth organisations. Rajeswara Rao treated Sitaramayya like a brother. Thus, Ramaswamy approached him and requested him to suggest to Sitaramayya that he should marry me. Rajeswara Rao did so, but Sitaramayya said that he wanted to stay single and dedicate himself to the movement, like

Sundarayya. Rajeswara Rao laughed at this and said that it was possible to be married and still work for the movement with devotion, like they all did. He was also of the opinion that marrying a patriotic woman would be an asset to the movement and advised Sitaramayya to see societal reforms as a part of his work for the movement.

Thus, Sitaramayya was convinced. Ramaswamy then sent a letter to Akkayya Choudhary to arrange a meeting between us.

MY WEDDING

We were Pamarru Reddys and Kondapalli Sitaramayya was a Jonnapadu Reddy. When the villagers came to know of our match, they objected because, normally, there was no intermarriage as the two Reddys saw themselves as belonging to different branches. According to them, widow remarriage was in itself unacceptable; on top of that, choosing someone from another Reddy community was just out of the question. They felt that it would bring disgrace to our village and threatened that they wouldn't let the wedding take place.

My father was frightened. Everyone would notice if the wedding happened in the month of Sravana.[7] So, it was decided that it should happen in the month of Ashada.[8] Since it was impossible to perform the wedding ceremony in our village, the elders decided to perform it in Ventrapragada, a communist bastion where Chandra Rajeswara Rao lived. My father owned and operated two route buses. But instead of using them, we rented another bus and left for Ventrapragada. I was escorted by about twenty-five to thirty young men.

The wedding venue was a big house owned by a friend. Sitaramayya and his parents came in a veiled bullock cart, like women in purdah hidden from the view of their fellow villagers. Chandra Rajeswara Rao's wife, Savitramma, dressed me as the bride. Communist comrades took on the role of elders and

conducted the marriage. Thammareddy Ramaswamy sat on the dais as the *kanya daata*[9] in my father's role. We exchanged wedding vows amid songs like *Deshamunu preminchumanna* (Love your country).[10] We garlanded each other with the promise, 'We will live together amicably and in an exemplary manner.' The elders blessed us and wished us a happy future. Savitramma threw a feast for us.

Where we would stay from then on became an issue after the wedding. Some elders suggested that we go to my parents' house in Pamarru. However, my mother was mourning the loss of her sister at that time. All the relatives were raising a hue and cry that my remarriage, being against custom, was the cause of that misfortune. Thus, we decided against Pamarru.

Though Sitaramayya's parents lived in Lingavaram village, he was raised by his grandmother's sister, Bucchamma, in Jonnapadu. For this reason, everyone considered Sitaramayya to be from Jonnapadu. Vangapati Rangareddy, who participated in the Indian freedom struggle and later became a communist, also belonged to Jonnapadu. He was a respected man in both the village and the *firka*. Sitaramayya had turned to communism under his influence. Since the elders from Jonnapadu had all attended our wedding and congratulated us on making it happen, everybody thought that it was a safe place for us to stay. Savitramma gave us a set of new clothes and saw us off.

Rangareddy visited Sitaramayya frequently. He always enquired about our well-being. Young men from that village too regaled us with good-humoured conversations. We lived in Jonnapadu in this manner for a few days.

Perhaps my father did not like the fact that we were staying at the old lady's house instead of his or my husband's parents' house. He sent a message inviting us to his own house. He invited Sitaramayya's relatives too and sent a bus to bring all of us. He organised a feast on this occasion and invited all our relatives in Pamarru. Those whose anger against my marriage had subsided attended the feast. Those who were

still angry mocked us for having a feast on the occasion of a second marriage.

The relatives from Jonnapadu were happy about Sitaramayya having married me. They went back and told Sitaramayya's father, 'Your daughter-in-law is a beautiful girl, with both property and status. We had a good time at their house. Perhaps you should think seriously about bringing both of them to your home here.'

While the Pamarru Reddy families of Krishna district lived in ten to twelve villages, Jonnapadu Reddy families lived in only two. Giving a daughter in marriage or getting a daughter-in-law was a major problem for them because of this. They had already asked the local freedom movement leaders to suggest alliances with Pamarru Reddy families instead of searching for other Jonnapadu Reddy families around and there had been no response from that quarter. Hence, the Jonnapadu Reddys were happy that the communists had managed an alliance. They were happy for Sitaramayya and congratulated him for having married a Pamarru girl.

Our friends from the party were also pleased at this turn of events. My mother, happy too, wanted us to stay with her for a few more days before going to Sitaramayya's parents' house. Meanwhile, the teachers' union wanted him to take part in teaching *karra saamu*[11] to the young men and establishing a youth society in Pamarru.

ACCHAMMA'S FIGHT

Some people in Pamarru attempted to excommunicate us. They prevented the washerman and barber from visiting our house. They also prevented members from my brother's wife's family from visiting.

One day, a few friends came to see us and I was standing outside the house after seeing them off. One Acchamma,

passing by, began swearing at me. I asked, 'Why do you scold me? What wrong have I done?' She slapped me and called me names for talking back. My mother saw this and shouted at her, attracting the attention of our neighbours. Acchamma walked away, still shouting. The teachers' and students' society members came to our house after hearing about this incident and assured us that they were with us. They promised to talk to Acchamma's family and teach her a lesson. However, my father stopped them because he felt that the young men's anger would only exacerbate the situation.

That evening, these young men organised a meeting in our village where they told the villagers stories about how relatives harassed Kandukuri Veeresalingam's[12] wife, Rajyalakshmi, for supporting her husband. They also explained how she had endured this and had taken on a mother's role, performing remarriages for widows. They also warned the audience that they would take action against those who behaved foolishly.

Akkayya Choudhary came to visit me and brought the news that people were criticising Sitaramayya, addressing him as 'the useless fellow who married a widow'. He consoled me, saying that his friends and he were thinking of ways to handle the situation.

THE HUMOUR OF MY HUSBAND, THE GOD

The young women among our relatives were performing the *Sravana gouri vratam*[13] and they came to invite us to a gathering of the women, offering vermilion to me along with my mother. My mother was very happy. After the women left, Sitaramayya joked, 'Aren't these rituals done so that women don't become widows in their lifetime? Koteswaramma will always be a wife, never a widow. She need not perform any ritual for this. I bless her as her husband, her god!' My mother and I couldn't resist a hearty laugh.

Sitaramayya continued, 'Treating the husband like a god is a belief of the past. In this age, a husband and wife should live like close friends. This convention of the wife addressing her husband with respect, without mentioning his name directly, calling him *emandi*[14] [an address of respect in Telugu] or referring to him as *maa vaaru* [my husband], and the husband treating her as an inferior addressing her as *osey* or *eme* [disrespectful terms for addressing a woman in Telugu] or "the mother of my children" should go. A husband and wife should address each other by name and live together with love and respect. Savitramma and Chandra Rajeswara Rao live like this, addressing each other by their first names. We will also follow them. Is that all right, Koteswaramma?' My mother smiled. I too smiled and nodded at him. I then understood how much a human being needs humour and happiness.

Sitaramayya's father sent my father a message that he wanted the two of us to come to his house in Lingavaram during the holy month of Sravana. My parents were overjoyed. They bought a lot of things for us to start a new home together although we did not ask them to. They prepared traditional sweets like *chalimidi*, *chilakalu* and *laddoo* in large quantities so that we could distribute them to relatives in Jonnapadu and Lingavaram. They bought new clothes for Sitaramayya's parents and grandparents, and gave me a grand farewell as I left for my in-laws' house. Relatives from both villages were pleased to receive the gifts I brought them. They were happy to have a relationship with the Pamarru Reddys, thanks to our marriage.

UNTOUCHABILITY

My in-laws' huge mansion had two farmyards. The one closer to the main house, was for the cattle, and the other, at a short distance, was for the haystack. Two servants used to come from the *malagudem*[15] to collect the cow dung from one yard,

and crush and pile it in smoothened heaps in the other yard. My mother-in-law made cow-dung cakes[16] out of this and pasted them to dry on the walls of the yard. She would also sell some of them to bring in extra money for the family. Since she felt that neither I nor her two servants knew how to make those cakes, she did everything herself. Before going out, she would alert me, saying, 'I've put horse gram on the stove [for the bullocks]. Give it to the elder servant Dharmanna when it is cooked.'

My mother-in-law would frequently lecture me about the servants. 'You do know that Dharma is a low-caste Mala, don't you?' she would ask me. 'According to our custom, Malas should not enter our houses. So, when I am not at home, you should do everything yourself. If you don't follow custom and, out of laziness, let the servants into the house, our neighbours will call me names. They will say, "As if getting her son married to a widow is not enough, now she is allowing untouchables into the house!" Don't let me go through all that.'

At my parents' house, since we leased our land to tenants, we neither had bullocks nor the task of cooking horse gram for them. I was a pampered child. I neither knew household work, nor did I ever see people of other castes working for us. I would rush off to play as soon as I returned from school.

I knew that people from Mala and Madiga castes were considered untouchables, but I had not thought about the reasons. I had heard and even sung songs like 'Aren't Malas human?', but never asked my elders why untouchability existed. Thus, I felt uncomfortable when my mother-in-law spoke as if I was supposed to know all these things.

One day, as I was trying to remove a pot of boiling horse gram from the stove, I was preoccupied. As a result, some boiling water accidentally splashed on my feet. I screamed in pain and dropped the pot. Dharmanna, who was standing in the corridor outside the kitchen, enquired, 'What happened, *amma*?' I showed him the fallen pot and asked him to mop the

water and collect the horse gram into a bowl. He protested, saying that he was a Mala and was not allowed to touch the pot.

'The pot does not know that you are a Mala,' I replied.

'If the mistress comes to know that I touched the pot, I will be fired,' he said.

'If the horse gram goes waste, your mistress will scold me and the bullocks will cry of hunger,' I countered.

Looking at my burnt leg, Dharmanna set his fears aside, drained water from the pot, collected the horse gram and went to the bullocks. As I began massaging my leg for some relief, I remembered an incident from my childhood.

Whenever I would go to play with my Brahmin friend Kameswari, her grandmother would say, 'Koteswaramma is a low-caste Sudra child. She should not enter our house. Let her sit on the porch outside.' Kameswari and I were good friends. She had no mother and had been raised by her grandmother. I don't know whether it was because Kameswari was motherless or because they were poor, but they did not have servant maids at home and she had to help her grandmother with the housework. Hence, she did not have much free time to come out and play, though I went to their house frequently. As soon as she saw me, her grandmother would say, 'You two can play as soon as Kameswari finishes her work. Sit on the porch until then. Don't go home.'

Likewise, when Kameswari went inside to change clothes after returning from school, her grandmother would tell her, 'Touching Koteswaramma or playing with her at school is all right, but don't touch her or play with her after returning home and with normal clothes on. Our house will be defiled.' Kameswari never questioned her grandmother on this issue. She just nodded.

Her grandmother would go regularly to a temple to listen to religious discourse. As soon as she left, I would join Kameswari in the household work, like washing the utensils and cleaning the kitchen, since finishing the work faster would

give us more time to play together. We felt that the traditional caste practices were for the elders and not for us children. But we decided that her grandmother should never know that we worked together.

One day, as Kameswari placed the ludo board and pawns on the porch, and I arranged the washed utensils and was closing the kitchen doors, her grandmother came back suddenly (perhaps there was no *Purana* reading that day at the temple). 'Didn't I tell you not to enter the house?' she screamed at me.

I was scared and began to cry. I stared at her without saying a word.

Kameswari came to my rescue. 'A dog went inside the kitchen. I was scared. So Koteswaramma drove it outside and was closing the kitchen when you arrived.'

'Is that so? It's fine then.' Her grandmother was pacified.

But that incident made me think. 'Dogs and cats are allowed into a Brahmin household, but non-Brahmins are not? Do only humans cause defilement? Will this game of lies we play here each day bring me happiness? Should I stop going to play with Kameswari from tomorrow?' There were so many thoughts running through my mind. It wasn't something I could discuss with my parents at the time.

But that was then. I wanted to tell Sitaramayya what happened at home with Dharmanna, but I was scared to discuss it in front of my mother-in-law. So I told him everything in her absence. He nodded and listened calmly. Later, massaging my leg with bottle gourd leaves from the yard, he asked, 'Were you scared to tell your mother-in-law about these burns on your leg? Or did you just sit here crying "*brochevaarevaruraa? ninuvinaa, raghuvaraa*" (Who will save me other than you, oh descendent of Raghu)?' He knew that I had learnt to sing Tyagaraja *kritis*.

'Experience breeds thought,' he continued. 'Your childhood experience told you that untouchability is wrong. So,

you saw in Dharmanna a fellow human being and asked him to come inside the house. But you could not ask my mother, "Why is he an untouchable?" just as in your childhood you could not ask Kameswari's grandmother why you weren't permitted into their house. Consciousness is not enough. You should have the courage to question.

'Since I did not want to attach any significance to my caste, I began calling myself Sitaramayya instead of Sitarami Reddy. You too defied caste rules and married me. So, if someone is called an untouchable in our house because of his caste, it should not be considered my mother's fault. It is actually our fault.'

My husband felt that getting rid of untouchability was also a part of social reform.

'Anticipating that such conflicts might arise in the families of party workers, our party is planning to start a political college for women in Vijayawada,' he said. 'They intend to teach topics like the origins of Indian traditions, their impact on society and so on. We will first start by changing ourselves at home and then win over others.'

After that, Sitaramayya began working with Dharmanna and having regular conversations with him. Whenever Dharmanna became apprehensive about this closeness, Sitaramayya laid a hand on his shoulder and joked, 'Why are you staring at me? Do you think I don't know how to do this work? Make me do some of your work.' He regularly spoke with Dharmanna about village life and the issues labourers faced while working for farmers.

A NEW LIFE AT MY IN-LAWS' HOUSE

Lingavaram was a small place. Young people in the village admired Sitaramayya and were frequent visitors at our home. They would discuss the activities of the youth society with him. They frequently engaged me in conversations and removed

any fear and rigidity that existed in me. They addressed me as 'sister' and used to tease Sitaramayya all the time.

My brother was a student at Bandar College[17] during this period. Whenever he visited me, he got copies of the communist magazine *Swatantra Bharathi* to Lingavaram on the pretext of getting me gifts, keeping them hidden beneath a basketful of guavas and palmyra sprouts. Youngsters in the village reproduced the magazine on stencils and made cyclostyled copies at our home at night. I made tea for them and helped them pack the copies in the basket, below the piles of sweet cakes that I had made. My mother-in-law did not approve of what I did.

As per the Communist Party's plans, Sitaramayya organised May Day and October Revolution anniversary processions, with red flags, in Gudiwada.[18] Famous leaders like P. Sundarayya and Rajeswara Rao spoke widely about the importance of these events. I was a regular participant in such processions and I sang songs of revolution on stage.

My return from Gudiwada was usually followed by a fuming rant from my mother-in-law. 'As if feeding all of them is not enough, you even join their processions. What will happen to the honour of the family if you behave like this?' Whenever she shouted thus, Sitaramayya asked me not to get upset and suggested that I ignore her.

Thammareddy Ramaswamy from my village once saw the copies of *Swatantra Bharathi* below the sweets in the basket and enquired who had done it. I heard later that he was thrilled when he found out it was me and remarked, 'So this is the work of my little sister!'

Chandra Rajeswara Rao noticed my participation in the processions and my singing on stage. He expressed surprise that his prediction that I would be useful to the movement was coming true. When I heard this, my respect for the man increased and I decided to work for the party sincerely.

KONDAPALLI SHOULD BECOME A MILLIONAIRE

Sitaramayya's mother wanted to make him rich. It was believed that her brother-in-law's son had 25 acres of land. She was determined that her son should also have at least as much. So, she tried to earn money through various odd jobs like rearing buffaloes for milk, selling chicken eggs and lending money. She justified her activities saying that she was doing everything for our sake, and wanted me to take care of the housework while she took care of the income.

Sitaramayya and his father were quite happy with my cooking. But to satisfy my mother-in-law, I had to learn to do things like pounding rice with a pestle and making cow-dung cakes. Comrades who frequented our house told Sitaramayya about this. 'You grew up under a lot of care and attention at your parents' house,' he said to me. 'Do you want people to think that we are harassing you and making you do these household chores?' Unable to respond, I left the room in tears. I continued doing these jobs in Sitaramayya's absence.

In our region, there was a practice called *naam*, where a labourer borrowed a bag of paddy from the landlord in the month of Karthik and returned two bags after the harvest, paying, in effect, an interest of 100 per cent in less than two months. Our party leaders were of the opinion that we should go beyond advocacy against exploitative moneylending by setting an example in not imposing such huge interest rates and abolishing the *naam* system.

Sitaramayya came to know that our servant borrowed paddy from my mother-in-law under this system. He immediately called all the people who had borrowed from her and returned everything that had been collected additionally from them. Soon after, he went to Vijayawada to attend to party matters. My mother-in-law locked herself in her room and wept. She went on a fast, blaming me, saying that I had

influenced Sitaramayya to do these things. 'We were told that you would bring property with you, but it looks as if we are going to lose more and more of our own instead,' she wailed.

I could not wait for Sitaramayya to return. Upset, I went to Pamarru without informing my mother-in-law. Sitaramayya came to Pamarru after two days and enquired, 'Did you tell your parents what happened?' He smiled when he heard that I had not. He stayed for a day and brought me back to Lingavaram.

In the broader movement against moneylending, party elders like Sundarayya and Rajeswara Rao had set an example by asking for their share of family property from their fathers and donating it for the development of the party's state cadre and the party magazine. Following those leaders, and as a district-level leader himself, Sitaramayya also took his share of property, sold it and donated all the money to the party. His father did not like this. His mother threatened to drown herself by jumping into a well. When a few young men stopped her, she declared that she would not stay in the house where her son and daughter-in-law lived, and left for Jonnapadu to live with her aunt. I was pregnant when this happened and suffered in several ways because of her sudden absence. I asked Sitaramayya to send me to Pamarru.

However, my brother's in-laws threatened that they would not send their daughter to Pamarru if I was allowed inside the house. Neither my parents nor Sitaramayya told me about this threat. Perhaps they did not want to hurt me. This was why Sitaramayya was always reluctant to send me to Pamarru. He would say it was because he could not live without me even for a day. Looking at the state of affairs, the party decided to send Sitaramayya to Jonnapadu as a teacher at the newly established Hindi school and assigned him to preside over the party activities there.

When Sitaramayya's father was informed about this, he asked me to stay back 'Your mother-in-law wanted to raise your daughter when she is born. She will come back after her anger subsides. She was simply venting her anger on you for her son donating everything to the party. She does not have a real grudge against you. Please do not go to Jonnapadu.'

I knew that Sitaramayya lived according to his party's decisions, but his mother did not like it. If this went on, the house would turn into hell and no one would be happy. Perhaps this was why the party had decided as it did. I wanted to discuss this with my father-in-law, but hesitated because I was afraid that I would be chided for trying to suggest what was good and what was not to elders.

THE THREE BROTHERS

My father-in-law understood my silence and made arrangements to drop me at Jonnapadu, with a servant to assist me. Once I had entered this house at Lingavaram ostentatiously in a car; now, I was preparing to leave on a bullock cart. I comforted myself that the same Jonnapadu that had given me a warm welcome as a new bride would be my support again.

The school children of Jonnapadu called me *akka* (elder sister) and I forgot my worries in their friendly company. They also helped with the household work. You remember, I had told you my father had buses? Thus, my mother was able to visit me regularly and she took care of my needs. Our landlady asked me to address her as *peddamma* (mother's elder sister or father's elder brother's wife) and looked after me very well. This *peddamma*'s house became my parental home. My first son was born here, but passed away within a few months after his birth. Perhaps he felt that I did not know how to raise him.

My father was so worried about my life the he couldn't concentrate on his business. His partners took advantage of

this and cheated him. The business ran into heavy losses and all the moneylenders demanded their money back. My brother's education was affected. Eventually, my father had to repay the loans by selling a part of our property.

Meanwhile, the government banned the Communist Party and Sitaramayya was forced to go underground. I was pregnant again. We met regularly at night and he imbued me with some courage. One day, he introduced me to his cousins, Ramaraghava Reddy and Gaadireddy Jagannatha Reddy. 'From today, they are not just your brothers-in-law, they are also your brothers,' he said. Indeed, they became my family. They helped me lose my fear of the police and we became close. I addressed Ramaraghava Reddy as *peddabbai* and Jagannatha Reddy as *chinnabbai*. They were very dear to me and my anxieties vanished with them around.

After learning about my travails, my mother, deciding that her daughter was more important to her than caste or community, came to live with me. I felt that it was unfair for her to leave my father, who had lost everything, to struggle alone in Pamarru. But my father was a man with self-respect. He bought two acres of land in my name with what was left after repaying the loans and also released my jewellery from the mortgage. He came to live with me only after putting a lid on these affairs.

The Communist Party declared the Second World War as the 'people's war'. Chandu was born on 25 December 1942. *Peddabbai* and *chinnabbai* called him 'people's war'. They played with a crawling Chandu, giving him the red flag. (Perhaps, Sitaramayya had this in mind when he named his party People's War later.) My father once took Chandu into his arms and said, 'Your *babais* [father's younger brothers, referring to *peddabbai* and *chinnabbai*] are such nice people!'

As my father said, they were good people. *Peddabbai* removed the 'Reddy' in his name and called himself Raghava

Rao. He married Lolakshi, a girl from the Kamma caste, in an act of social reform. He brought her to our house and gave me a taste of joint family life. *Chinnabbai* earned fame as a student leader and went to Russia and Czechoslovakia. He studied in Prague and married a Czech woman called Natasha. When they came to India together, he visited us before visiting his own mother. We were living in Vijayawada at that time. Later, he took me and Lolakshi along with them to Jonnapadu. So, the three of us sisters-in-law spent two happy days there. Among these three brothers, the first one had married a widow, the second had married outside his caste and the third had married outside both religion and country. The villagers congratulated the brothers for bringing such distinction to their village.

The government lifted the ban on the Communist Party in 1941. All comrades emerged from their underground existence. My father left this world peacefully after learning that Sitaramayya would be back soon. All our relatives from Pamarru visited us. My parents-in-law took care of my father's last rites. My aunts lamented that he had not died in his native village. My brother and I wept because they would now make our mother a widow.

PRAJASAKTI IN VIJAYAWADA

After the ban was lifted, the party ordered Sitaramayya to shift to Vijayawada and supervise party activity in Krishna district. They also decided to set up a party office in this area to strengthen the Party's presence. The *Prajasakti* weekly was converted into a daily newspaper. My mother also moved to Vijayawada with us. We began living in the Gandhinagar area. The party decided to set up people's organisations and also involve women in all its activities. Thus, it issued a mandate that the wives and sisters of all party workers should enter the movement. It ran colleges to imbue political consciousness in women. I met many of the women who were related to party

workers in these classes. I also had a glimpse of all the popular leaders when they came to deliver their lectures. I respected them as they had donated everything they had to the party and dedicated their life to it. I wanted to do everything they wanted us to do. So, I began collaborating with other women in the classes.

In an era when allowing women to step out of their houses was considered a crime, Kambhampati Manikyamba, Josyabhatla Subbamma, Manikonda Suryavati, Tapi Rajamma and others among us sold copies of *Prajasakti* on the streets of Vijayawada, along with the party's young men. Ignoring harassment and catcalls, we worked with a Bolshevik spirit in those days.

The party also set up a few volunteer groups, aiming at a cultural renaissance. Those of us who started a new trend by selling the party magazine on the streets also participated in this mission. Rajamma and I, along with two others, gave performances based on folk traditions at the party's state conference in Vijayawada. My mother and people like her prepared pickles and other food for the more than 100,000 people who attended the All India Farmer's Conference. We marched for several miles, raising slogans like *Dunne vannide bhoomi* (The land belongs to those who till it) and the city of Vijayawada stared at us in amazement. We also sang songs like *Nee cheti chaluvatho, nee chemata eruputo, vaatedu dubbesi varichenu panduga* (Oh, the paddy has grown so high with the warmth of your labour, the heat of your sweat) and won the appreciation of those who came from other states.

We sang *Ninnu abalanu vaaru nirvinnulai chooda, paara chetanu battave chellemmaa, matti tattanu ettave chellammaa* (Lift the shovel in your hands, little sister, lift the basket of mud, little sister, and stagger those who think that you are weak), referring to the government's inability to take care of the farmer who was not provided enough water for thousands of

acres of farmland. Singing thus, we participated in the task of de-silting the Krishna canal.

The anti-development groups and the agents of the *zamindar*s (landowners) could not tolerate these brave acts of the communist women and the positive public reaction to them. Thus, they started attacking us politically. They ran a magazine called *Mulakola* with Bandi Bucchayya as its editor, in which they accused the communists of ruining the social structure. They wrote a play called *Vengamma Natakam* (The Drama of Vengamma) and performed it everywhere. They also asked Narla Venkateswara Rao[19] to write satirical pieces about us. They encouraged goons to attack our party office and our homes. The goons first went to the district office and tried to disgrace Chandra Savitramma.[20] They met with strong opposition from the youth. They later went to the party's state head office, where forty party members were having a meeting—Raavi Naravanareddy[21] too was in the office at that time, as far as I remember. The party members decided to confront the goons. Marching out of the party office, they drew a line and warned the goons that they would be punished if they crossed it. The goons had weapons and the party workers only the sticks that held their flags. Yet, they collected some sticks from a neighbouring shop that sold wood and got ready to fight. Chandra Rajeswara Rao and Sitaramayya stood in the front row. Sitaramayya knew how to use both the stick and the sickle. The goons soon fled, unable to handle this retaliation from our leaders. Later, they attacked our house. I was pregnant at that time. So, my mother sent me to our neighbour's house and informed the party youth about the attack. Our party members stood firm, and they had a lot of public support. When they saw this, the goons ran off. The next day, the party members met the families of the goons and warned them that serious action would be taken if acts like attacking party or non-party women were repeated. Some days

passed with a cycle of open confrontations, filing of cases in court, facing adjournments and producing false witnesses.

But the party earned the trust of common people after this incident. It put an end to rowdyism and Vijayawada flourished as a centre of progressive literature and culture.

THE MAHILA SANGHAM

While in Jonnapadu, I had restricted my party activities to Gudiwada *taluk*. After arriving in Vijayawada, I began attending the party cell meetings as a member. I participated in various cultural programmes aside from the usual party and the Mahila Sangham (women's association) work. We introduced several reforms with more commitment than the leaders of the national movement in our area. The party organised night schools for youth, thus keeping them away from bad habits. They established youth associations where 40 per cent of the men married either widows or women who were not from their caste. The party also established children's associations that encouraged positive thoughts and inculcated discipline among children. The party expanded widely as a result of all this.

Comrades brought their wives and sisters to work in the Mahila Sangham. Our group consisted of the state-level Mahila Sangham members—Manikonda Suryavathi, Katragadda Hanumayamma, Ellanki Annapurnamma, Tapi Rajamma and Josyabhatla Subbamma. Suryavathi's mother-in-law, Bullemma, ran a commune in Vijayawada. Unmarried women like Rajamma and Satyavathi were a part of this commune. Suryavathi and her husband donated all their property to the party. Bullemma also did a lot of service to the party. Everyone called her 'Gorky's Mother'.

Rajamma and I were entrusted with the responsibility of handling party activities in the backward villages of Tiruvuru and Nandigama *taluk*. We organised small meeting groups with the help of local party volunteers and educated the locals about

women's rights, primary health care, maternity and childcare. We encouraged them to become party members and distribute party literature. There were a few 'red villages', which were party's bastions. Virullapadu of Nandigama *taluk* was one of them. Rajamma and I frequently visited this village and started with the project of building good toilets. In those days, villages did not have lavatories. Dr Acchamamba[22] lectured us several times about the health hazards of not having lavatories. We transferred this knowledge to the local Mahila Sangham members. We also spoke about social evils like caste and untouchability, and other topics we had learnt during our political classes with the party comrades. Thus, we did our best to spread the Communist Party's ideals in this area.

The party had faced some opposition in Sanagapadu village of Nandigama *taluk*. We once learnt that Suryavathi was attacked there. So Rajamma and I decided to visit the place. Our comrades warned that we might be insulted and advised us against going. But we went ahead and organised a small meeting in Sanagapadu, where we sang a few songs. People were attracted to the songs and, gradually, we enrolled twenty people from the village into our party. We felt extremely happy about this small victory.

Some people thought about merging our party's Mahila Sangham with that of the Congress Party's. People like Aruna Asaf Ali from Calcutta had also put some effort in this direction. But Congress members were not in favour of this idea. We attended their Kakinada conference and showed how we recruited new members to our party. Famous leaders like Bharathi Ranga showed interest in the merger, but it did not happen. The Congress membership at that time cost 1 rupee. Our party's membership cost only an anna.[23] We understood that a collaboration was not possible and dropped the idea of a merger. We organised a separate state conference of our Mahila Sangham in Chilumuru in Guntur district. It was attended by elders like Hajara Begum and comrades from

various parts of the country, including Kerala and Madras. In this meeting, we elected our state committee and the various district committees. Hanumayamma, Ellanki Annapurna, Rajamma and I were a part of the Krishna district committee.

DOCTOR ACCHAMAMBA

Dr Acchamamba's house in Suryapeta in Bezawada[24] was the centre for all our activities. She had delivered both my children and was a motherly figure for many of us. She trained several party volunteers in women's health, child nutrition and maternity care. She regularly advised family planning for the party volunteers at the time of their marriage and blessed them specifically to give birth to one or two children only. One of the programmes in our Mahila Sangham was to educate people against seeking midwives' help during childbirth. Dr Acchamamba trained several party women, including Josyabhatla Subbamma, to be nurses. Her house was always active with the clamour of people, more like a hospital or a party office than a house. Many great intellectuals were frequent visitors. I saw people like ChaSo, Somasundar[25] and Raavi Narayanareddy for the first time in her house.

The obedience and strong belief that caused the 'party mentality' was evident on one occasion. Dr Acchamamba was once disappointed with a party decision and differed with it. At that time, all of us, the Vijayawada Mahila Sangham members, were in Nandigama prison as political detainees. Later, when we were shifted to the Vijayawada prison for not attending the court hearings regularly, our members did not talk to her properly. Dr Acchamamba once saw Rajamma walking with her daughter, Vimala, and immediately took the child in her arms. All the other members criticised Rajamma for letting her daughter go near Dr Acchamamba. Everyone wanted to toe the party line. We later came to know that Dr Acchamamba was so hurt at this behaviour that she did not eat anything for

two days. She was like a mother to us, she'd delivered our babies and was an inspiring personality. How could we have behaved so rudely towards her? Rajamma and I felt bad about this and wondered at how ruthless politics was.

The next day, the police came to take Dr Acchamamba and Suryavathi as political detainees. We protested against this since Suryavathi was sick at that time. The police became angry with us and threatened to beat us. Dr Acchamamba stood in front of us like a wall and said, 'I won't allow you to beat my children! Beat me first if you want to.' She also warned them saying, 'It is not correct on your part to move a sick person now. I am talking as a doctor.' I felt ashamed thinking of how different her behaviour towards us was from our petty behaviour towards her.

LITERARY AND CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

The Communist Party established itself in all walks of public life with its dedicated work. It wanted to popularise the writings of Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Gurajada Apparao and Gidugu Ramamurthy[26] on the use of colloquial language. The Progressive Writers' Association was established in Tenali in 1943. In 1944, the organisation proposed to stage Gurajada's *Kanyasulkam* as a token of respect towards the author and wanted women to play the female roles. Sitaramayya asked me to take part. I was hesitant because I felt that acting in a play was not as easy as singing or performing *kolatam*.[27] But he managed to extract my consent by fasting for three days!

Female actors of that era were always spoken about in a not so complimentary manner, and I had concerns that we would also be branded if we started acting. Sitaramayya must have told this to the elder Maddukuri Chandram, who handled cultural aspects in the party. Chandram spoke to me. 'We are introducing social as well as cultural reforms to bring about a change in society. Will we back off because someone

is calling us names? Our women are doing a good job on the stage in Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore's niece, Devika Rani, impresses the public with her performances. We should follow her example.'

Josyabhatla Subbamma, Komarraaju Padmavathi and I played the female roles in that play. Although none of us were great actors, people watched it with complete attention because of the good script and great dialogue. Later, the Praja Natya Mandali (roughly translated as the People's Drama Association) was established. It brought fame to the party by staging plays like *Apaninda*, *Mundadugu* and *Maa Bhoomi*.

We sang Gurajada's *Purnamma* and *Kanyaka* on stage at our Mahila Sangham gatherings regularly. We also narrated stories about the contributions of Kandukuri Rajyalakshmi and her husband, Veeresalingam. We celebrated the birth and death anniversaries of Gurajada and Kandukuri. We also published and popularised their literature.

At this time, an all-India conference of literary and cultural renaissance took place in Bombay. A team from Andhra state won first prize for their performance on the burning issues of that time, particularly the impact of the Second World War and the Bengal famine. I could not go to Bombay because of the restrictions on the number of people allowed. According to the party's decision, only the persons responsible for the play were to go—Suryavathi, Hanumayamma (state joint secretary) and the secretary.

HISTORY'S MEMORY: CHANDU AND KARUNA

A girl was born to us in August 1944. Being human is more important to humans than being religious. If there is compassion in humans, there wouldn't be cruelty. With this spirit, our comrades called my daughter Karuna (compassion).

Our son Chandrasekhar's name came from the revolutionary leader Chandrasekhar Azad. Chandra Rajeswara Rao

was influenced by him during his student days at Benares. Both Rajeswara Rao and Sitaramayya admired and respected Azad. Rajeswara Rao and Savitramma's son also had the same name. We differentiated between them by addressing our son as Chandu and their son as Azad.

The Vijayawada comrades lived like a family. Our neighbour Vemuri Nageswara Rao's wife, Santamma, and I were like sisters. All the people in our lane thought that we belonged to the same family. Santamma called my mother *amma*. If Karuna cried in my absence, she fed her. I then fed her son after I returned. We also shared what we cooked.

GARIKAPATI'S TEARS

Famine was rampant in Bengal and the party decided that we should work to serve the people struck by it. Along with other Mahila Sangham groups, we began a mission of collecting clothes and food grains for the famine victims. We sang songs. I played a role in the play *Idee Lokam* (Thus, the World), which was based on this famine. It narrated the story of a Bengali village girl who comes to the city to earn money and ends up becoming a prostitute. If someone asked her name, she would respond, 'I am a zombie.' My performance in this role moved the audience and earned us huge donations. Garikapati Rajarao[28] was moved to tears. He came to our green room and said, 'When you act, you seem like Nazar's[29] sister.' We won a best play award and I got the best actress award. We were given these awards on stage at the Rashtra Yuvajana Vidyarthi Mahasabha (State Youth and Student Conference). Our Russian comrades who saw the play complimented me on my performance even though they didn't know the language. This brought me more happiness than the prize itself. We performed this play in all parts of the state and contributed our share to the victims of the Bengal famine. Chandram and Sitaramayya, who had forced me into acting and encouraged me, came to mind.

SUPPORT TO THE TELANGANA STRUGGLE

The Congress government was formed in 1947 with Jawaharlal Nehru as prime minister of India. Before he became PM, Nehru had said, 'The land belongs to those who till it.' The Communist Party asked him to implement this in practice and advised him to not support the thieves who wanted to steal land from the farmers. It also warned him that if the government did not come to the farmers' aid, they would oppose the government and fight them as they did the British. The Telangana peasants' struggle[30] had already begun by then, on 4 July 1946, and the party was supporting it. Party leaders from Andhra and brave people like Sitaramayya were already training the Telangana communists in guerrilla techniques.

The government imposed a ban on the party and its magazine on the charges that it was aiding this armed struggle. It also banned the *Andhra Mahila* magazine, which was run by the Mahila Sangham. We ran this magazine under the editorship of Dr Acchamamba. Chandram assisted us in writing articles and editorials. Later, Darsi Subhadramma took charge. It survived only two issues. It was decided in the Rashtra Mahila Mahasabha of Vijayawada that we should work towards the lifting of this ban. Although the government declared Section 144, banning group meetings, 1,000 women went in a procession, demanding that the ban on the *Andhra Mahila* be lifted. As soon as this procession reached Governorpet, the police fired tear gas, which resulted in several women becoming unconscious. The procession stopped and around 100 women were taken to Nandigama prison at midnight. The government sent our president, Dr Acchamamba, and our secretary, Manikonda Suryavathi, to Kadalur prison in Tamil Nadu. Sixteen district representatives like me were harassed through court cases and hearings. Since we refused to attend the hearings, we were booked and jailed under an additional case.

We were awarded fines and imprisonment after the case trial. The properties of those who refused to pay the fine were taken over by the government. Sitaramayya was underground during this time. Police attacks, vandalism and harassment to find out Sitaramayya's whereabouts became a daily occurrence. My children and I suffered a lot in this period.

Doddi Komurayya was the first warrior to die in Telangana's struggle for land, food and freedom. His death only made the people stronger. 'A drop of blood contains a roaring fire ... a warrior's death will give birth to a thousand more,' a poet's words indeed came true. Thousands of brave heroes came out of this struggle and it created a history of sorts by reaching into the Telugu literary and cultural scene in addition to influencing the political and economic life of the time.

I was reminded of our young men and women fighting government atrocities and the ban on our party and other people's organisations, singing, 'Let knives pierce us ... let the blood flow like a river, do not lower the colours ... salute the red flag'.

Our party took on the responsibility of helping and training the wounded warriors of this struggle and tending to their medical needs. The people's organisations of Andhra state took most of this burden onto their shoulders. They also welcomed those who migrated to Andhra because of the atrocities of the Razakars.[31]

Telangana forces began attacking the palaces of the *doras* who were the Nizam's accomplices. The number of rebelling areas increased, spreading to the Andhra region. The police of Andhra started behaving like fascists and attacked the families of party workers and sympathisers. They imprisoned women activists and arrested them on the charge of anti-government activity. Imposing fines and imprisonments, and taking away the property of those who failed to pay the fine became commonplace.

There was no protection for women of the party. Even their parents, fearing police attacks, refused to provide them shelter. In addition to this, the police began harassing them about the whereabouts of their husbands who had gone underground. They intimidated women by burning household foodstuffs with kerosene and breaking pickle jars. As if the Andhra police were not enough, the government invited the Malabar police to step in.

LIFE IN EXILE

All the leaders, from the state level to the *taluk* level, went underground. The party decided to invite courageous women who had a sound understanding of communism, and women from the families of the exiled leaders who were struggling with insecurity, to work in secret locations where these leaders lived. Thus, some of the women revolutionaries left to work incognito.

I had to leave. My husband too encouraged me to do so. So where did I live my secret life? What work did I do? What issues did I face? How did I make myself useful to the movement? How did I live? Answering all these questions will make this a very long story. Let me share with you instead a few unforgettable incidents from my memory.

Bandar

The Communist Party had a few underground dens in Bandar. A student called Potluri Narasimha Rao, his sister and brother-in-law, another person called Katragadda Venkatarayudu and I lived together in one of these dens. We told the neighbours that we were all living in Bandar for the sake of Narasimha Rao's education. Sitaramayya and Kadiyaala Gopalarao occasionally visited us during the nights and stayed for a few days. I cooked

for these comrades and made copies of their secret papers. Narasimha Rao went to a college just to lend our story an air of truth. He was shifted to another den later.

I was pregnant at that time and was not in a position to work. However, the den had a lot of visitors. I felt that in addition to being useless, I might be a burden on the party. Perhaps the party comrades also felt this way. They wanted me to undergo an abortion. Since taking me to any doctor would be dangerous to the party leaders, they gave me some traditional herbal medicines. The medicines worked, but the bleeding did not stop. We could not afford to have our neighbours notice us, so I couldn't wash my blood-stained clothes and dry them outside. We did not have indoor bathrooms and lavatories back then. We bathed in makeshift bathrooms. I did not have the energy to walk till those bathrooms either. Narasimha Rao used to take care of the sanitation. I must salute him for what he did for me. One day, responding to a crisis in my condition, Dr Lakshmi visited us, fully dressed in a traditional manner, giving an impression to the outsiders that she had come to our house to invite us for some function. She came in a *jhatka* (horse-drawn carriage) as cycle-rickshaws did not exist at that time. She examined me and told the others, 'If I'd been late by even an hour, her life would have been in danger. Tell the party workers not to try such experiments on anyone, anywhere.' She complimented Narasimha Rao for what he had done. Perhaps the news about my health spread, for no comrade visited us during the next four days. Narasimha Rao took care of everything. In those days, the party comrades did anything and everything imaginable or unimaginable for the sake of the party and security, without fear or disgust.

What happened afterwards, when we moved? Was that den vacated? What happened to Narasimha Rao's education and future? We weren't to ask such questions even if we were curious. Those were the days of secret lives!

During this period, every communist leader had a courier.[32] One of them took me from the present den to another. It was a big house and looked like a safe haven for the party, with children playing outside and with a traditional housewife who performed religious rituals and drew a rangoli in front of the house regularly. This was a meeting place for various state-level leaders, but the mistress of the house and I never knew who came in and who went out. Our duty was restricted to cooking and preparing tea. One comrade from Krishna district was responsible for bringing the party leaders to these meetings and sending them back safely afterwards. (After the ban on the party was lifted, he got married and started an automobile business in Vijayawada.)

While I was in this den, there was a cyclone. We heard hurricane warnings on the radio. It soon became dark and there was no power supply. The wind was so strong that the kerosene lamps would have been extinguished had we opened the door. The couriers arrived and shifted some of our comrades to another location under cover of blankets. There were indications that this house would fall down because of the cyclone. I guessed that this might have been the reason for shifting the important people despite the bad weather conditions. We heard walls falling down and tiles from the roof flying away. Two comrades, one with his wife and children, were still in the house along with me.

The rain entered our house and drenched everything. I was anaemic and began shivering, cold and wet. One of the comrades put a cot in a dry spot in the house and asked me to sit there. He stood beside me for two to three hours, protecting me with an umbrella. The cyclone subsided after some time. My woman friend thanked god for saving us. Our comrade patted my shoulder saying, 'Don't tell her there is no god. Let her be happy with that thought. It will be easier for all of us if she remains a believer.'

Eluru

In those days, Eluru also had two or three dens. I stayed in one of them for a few days and did whatever the party told me to. I was shifted to another den later. I heard that Potluri Sundaram of this den participated in the armed struggle. He was short and dark, and he always carried a weapon with him. We heard the story that he had staged a few escapes from dangerous locations right in front of the zamindari houses. He usually escaped in the guise of a bare-chested man wearing a saffron dhoti and a turban, his slippers hung on a stick, saluting everyone and saying, 'I touch your feet, sir, I am your slave.' I wanted to see the weapons he was supposed to possess, a desire I expressed to another close comrade, whom I called *babai*. He warned me that we should not ask questions about who he was, what he did and if he had a weapon with him. 'He dressed up as someone from the Madiga caste and escaped danger. Let us think of how we would escape if necessary. I shall transform myself into a begging Brahmin. You will be my daughter who was abandoned by her husband. We shall both ask for alms.' He added, jokingly, 'So, don't throw those threads used to wrap various packages. They will be useful to make my sacred thread.' We had such occasions for humour too despite living under dangerous conditions.

I was taken to another den from here. When I arrived there, it appeared that a committee meeting had just finished. Everyone had left the place after dinner. Sitaramayya was alone. Narasimha Rao (the student who had taken care of me at Bandar) and Moolpuri Koteswara Rao (the courier who stayed with us there) were organising things outside. I was greatly relieved to see Narasimha Rao. I felt as if I was seeing someone dear to my heart. He was affectionate with everyone. I was told that Sitaramayya had met with an injury while playing football and was advised rest for four days. The truth was that he had been ordered to undergo a vasectomy since

the party thought that it would be difficult to handle issues like childbirth and infant care when both the husband and wife were living in exile. Sitaramayya and several others were vasectomised under the guidance of one Dr Tilak. Narasimha Rao informed me about this. However, for the public, they made up a story that Narasimha Rao's brother-in-law had met with an accident while playing football and that his sister came to take care of him.

This den had many popular visitors. Lakshmi Perumallu[33] was one of them. He became popular as a film actor after the ban on our party was lifted. He also regularly wrote secret papers and asked me to make copies of them. I remember his handwriting was like a string of pearls on paper. This den did not have a servant maid since it was discovered that information about the party had been leaked to the outside world through servants. So I had to take care of the cooking (for the visitors) as well as the household work. It was tiring. Narasimha Rao helped me with cleaning the house and washing the utensils. When the food was insufficient, he would eat less than usual and suggest that we share whatever was left over. I came to know that Moolpuri Koteswara Rao expressed anguish that he could not help me since I always sought Narasimha Rao's assistance. But I did not have that sort of an intimacy with him.

One day, the couriers expressed concern that the CID had become suspicious about communists in this den. Thus, they suddenly shifted an immobile Sitaramayya along with some secret party papers to an unknown location. 'This house will be empty for two days. You have to live alone,' they told me and left after locking the entrance. Would the police leave on seeing the lock? Or would they break the door open? Plagued by these questions, I did not cook because the smoke might have been a clue to my presence for the police. (In those days, we did not have stoves. We used cow-dung cakes as fuel.) Thus,

I stayed without food for two days. More than the hunger, I was worried about what the police might do to me.

On the second day, Koteswara Rao came with a bullock cart and told me to pack a suitcase and take a water bottle. Neither the courier nor I knew where we were headed. It was supposed to be a secret. We went to the railway station and boarded a train. At about 10 the next morning, Koteswara Rao came to my compartment and said, 'Another comrade will come and pick you up at the next station. Don't forget to take the water bottle with you. Ask him to carry the suitcase if you want.'

Visakhapatnam

The train stopped at Visakhapatnam. Adusumilli Mallikarjuna Rao, a comrade from Koduru village of Gudiwada *taluk* received me. He arranged for a *jhatka* and followed me on his bicycle. The *jhatka* stopped in front of a house near the Central Jail. I got out of the vehicle assuming that was where I would be living, but he took me to a new terraced house about four buildings away.

Chandra Savitramma, Chandra Rajeswara Rao, Thammareddy Ramaswamy and two other comrades were living in this house. Savitramma noticed my fatigue and offered me some coffee. After I finished washing up, she suggested that I rest. I forgot most of my tiredness simply listening to her.

Sitaramayya and other leaders frequently visited this den. When I slept on the terrace in the cool air, I could hear the hourly alert bells from the jail and I was reminded of my fellow comrades in jails. I wondered how many more would be jailed. How many more would be hanged? (We had come to know that someone was hanged in our neighbourhood jail the previous day.) Sleep usually eluded me after these thoughts.

I was witness to how respectful and mindful Sundarayya was towards women. Either he knew about my abortion or because

I looked very weak, he suggested that I eat nutritious food. When the doctor advised a diet of milk and eggs, Savitramma responded, 'Koteswaramma doesn't eat eggs, nor does she drink milk. She is not used to them since her childhood.' Sundarayya said, 'We can do what is needed only if we are in good health. We should eat everything needed for our health.' As long as he stayed in this den, he regularly enquired if I had had my eggs and milk. 'In times to come, we might not find food and medicine either,' he warned us. We women were used to feeding the men first and eating whatever remained, so Sundarayya frequently asked Savitramma and me to eat with the men to ensure that we ate properly. He never complained about the quality of the food even when it did not taste good.

Living in this den, I learnt about some of the recent developments outside—marriages, new spouses entering the party and so on. In the absence of the den keeper, a few comrades approached the women in the den and expressed sexual interest in them. The women locked them up and complained to the den keeper later. Savitramma told her husband, 'These women are serving our comrades like mothers, braving the fear of police and without thinking about the consequences, because they believe in the party ideals. How can these comrades behave like this? Is there no difference between sex maniacs and communists? From now on, please keep wife and husband together in these dens. Don't separate them.' After some discussion, Rajeswara Rao is supposed to have responded: 'When we are working underground, it is impossible to arrange for a wife and husband to be always together. Sitaramayya is in the Nizam struggle areas now, training people in guerrilla warfare. Can Koteswaramma live there with him? Can you tag along wherever I go? Don't worry! No one will come near people like you. These comrades must have imagined that the innocent women would give in to their sexual advances and not object. These are human weaknesses.'

Rajeswara Rao told us that there was another den in Visakhapatnam. A well-known comrade and his wife Kasturi had left their jobs to live there. We learnt that Kasturi had come on maternity leave and given birth to a daughter. I came to understand during this stay with Savitramma that dens with children and old people did not make the police suspicious because they looked peaceful and natural.

Thoughts about the well-being of my mother and my children depressed me. Savitramma also thought about her son. We at least had our mothers to take care of our children. We wondered about the position of people who did not have anyone. 'We should try to be like women warriors and not think about our children.' With these thoughts, we would wipe our tears.

I noticed that most of the workers in these dens and also the couriers were from Krishna district. 'Why is that so?' I asked Savitramma once. She said that the party had a stronghold there and there were a lot of people who studied Marxism in that area.

I heard that the police had gunned down Chintapalli Paparao, a leader of the Yuvajana Sangham (a communist youth association). We came to know that when the police trained their guns on him, his dying words were, 'It's immoral to shoot someone who is unarmed. Give me a weapon and then shoot me.' We were moved to tears. He was close to both Savitramma and me. He was a brave warrior who eventually fell into mother earth's lap unarmed.

If Doddi Komurayya was the first great warrior to embrace death in Telangana, Paparao was perhaps the first in Andhra. We lamented the many more future warriors who would give their lives to build an equal society for our future.

We heard stories that the police were creating havoc in Krishna, Guntur and both the Godavari districts. They were also threatening everyone saying that those who helped or hosted communists would meet the fate of Chintapalli Paparao. While

making carbon copies of a few secret papers, we learnt that the state Communist Party had been split into two zones, one comprising the five districts between Krishna and Srikakulam. Sitaramayya, Uddamraju Ramam and Balaji Dasu were some of the important leaders in this zone. I also got some updates about these changes through conversations with Savitramma.

A few days later, they shifted a few documents, books and luggage from this den to another place. It was decided that Savitramma should also move to the other location. She wiped her tears and mine and said, 'I don't know when we will meet again. Do the job that you are given without fear. Keep thinking of the people who gave their lives for the party.' She left the den. Two days later, I was asked to get ready with a suitcase and a water bottle again.

Puri and Nagpur

I was taken to the temple town of Puri and left at a hotel where Sitaramayya stayed. I was there for four days. I had heard that the lord Jagannatha's chariot rolled on without stopping. I had also sung Sri Sri's song, *Patitulara, bhrashtulara, edavakandedavakandi vastunnaayi! Vastunnaayi! Vastunnaayi! Jagannaathuni ratha chakralu*[34] (O you people suffering and oppressed, cry not! They come! They come! The wheels of Jagannatha's chariot are coming to free you) on an occasion some time ago. I wanted to see the Puri temple and the chariot of Jagannatha. But Sitaramayya vetoed it, saying that our underground life did not allow us such pleasures.

Later, we stayed at a hotel in Nagpur for four days. One day, I heard a Telugu song in Balasaraswathi's[35] voice on a radio in the next room. I forgot that we were living incognito and went out of our room humming in tune. Sitaramayya immediately stopped me, saying that we should not let anyone know that we were Telugu speakers. I pulled myself together and went back into our room. We shifted to another

hotel the same night. Dressed like a traditional wife with a *mangalasutram*,[36] a chain of black beads and toe-rings, I stayed in that hotel for two days. It was small. Since Sitaramayya knew Hindi, he conversed with everyone easily. I did not know Hindi, so I spoke very little. The hotel proprietor seemed to know Sitaramayya. He told him, 'Your room is not a suitable place for prayer. Ask your wife to perform her prayers in the prayer room. That way there won't be any suspicion.' I went there for my 'prayers', took the *prasad* (food offered to God, consumed by the worshippers later) they offered and tried my best not to raise their suspicions.

Once again, my faithful comrade, Gangadhara Rao, took me to Raipur on a train.

Raipur

One comrade entered our compartment when the train stopped at a station before Raipur. He got off at the next station, but instead of taking his holdall with him, he took mine. I did not know then that the holdall he left for me contained weapons and secret papers. I came to know later that weapons, food, secret papers and strategy planners were transferred from Madhya Pradesh and the Dandakaranya forest region to the Telangana armed struggle through women comrades.

Raipur had both new and old buildings. A few comrades lived in one old house. I stayed on the top floor of that house for a week, working as their cook and copywriter. Later, I moved to another den with my luggage. This den and its kitchen were both on the top floor, but the bathroom was on the ground floor. It was difficult to move downstairs or upstairs in that freezing cold. A comrade did the job of heating water on a kerosene stove and bringing it up. Waking up before sunrise was also hard.

I was introduced to our neighbours as one comrade's wife and another's sister. A goldsmith's family lived opposite to our

den and a young woman from that family would stare at us all the time. I was afraid that she knew that we were communists. When I discussed this with my comrade 'husband', he said, laughing, 'Why do you think that? Perhaps she likes our comrade young Pattabhi!'

'Everyone should behave as in a normal family and perform the tasks given by the party. We should not raise the suspicions of our neighbours. Don't keep the doors and windows closed all the time.' These were some of the instructions we received from the party. Sitaramayya also visited this den to discuss secret matters with other comrades.

Later, I was shifted to another den near Guru Nanak Mandir where a few other leaders lived. Sitaramayya and another comrade joined us later. Expatriates from Punjab also lived in Raipur in those days, some of them in overcrowded houses as they could not afford to pay the rent. Perhaps this den did not attract police attention because of the presence of this expatriate community. Our comrades visited it freely.

Almost everyone could speak in Hindi though they were not fluent with reading and writing it. Everyone understood the importance of knowing Hindi. Balaji Das, one of our comrades, however, never made an effort to improve his Hindi and would make several mistakes while speaking. We teased him endlessly to pass the time in those dangerous days.

A few days later, another leader, Sitaramayya's cousin, Kondapalli Raghava Rao, and his wife, Lolakshi, came to this den.They took charge as den keepers. Lolakshi worked tirelessly, cooking for the visitors and treating them with kindness. Another comrade and his wife, a popular cultural performer in the Praja Natya Mandali came with their ten-month old son. Around this time, we heard news that police atrocities in the Circar areas were on the rise.[37] Our comrades were being tortured and taken to concentration camps, and women were being harassed. We also heard about incidents in Katuru and Elamarru villages in Krishna district, where

villagers were stripped naked and, driven by lathi[38] blows, paraded around Gandhi's statue. Although we did not get every update, some news did reach us and we mourned the death of the comrades we knew. To keep us from weeping, women like us were not told everything.

We named a comrade's son Amar, commemorating all those who died in this struggle. However, Amar was not a healthy child. He suffered from frequent diarrhoea. As we hardly saw any children around us, he was everyone's pet.

One day, a senior comrade approached me and said, *Peddammai*—everyone called me *peddammai* (elder daughter) and Lolakshi, *chinnammai* (younger daughter)—'I am going to bring you two mangoes.'

'How can we get mangoes in this season?' I asked. 'Please don't joke with me.'

But an hour later, he came with my daughter, Karuna, and my son, Chandrasekhar. I was both happy and sad at the same time. I held them tight. None of us could believe that we were actually meeting. I came to know that my mother, children and Rammohan Rao[39] had played a role in providing a safe haven to a few comrades. My mother cooked wherever she went and also acted as a 'mother' to the comrades. Rammohan Rao was about fourteen at that time. Everyone called him Ramu and sent him on errands.

I received some news from home. A comrade, Malireddy Satyanarayana Reddy, from our village was shot. Two others were sent as detainees to Rayavellur prison.[40] My father-in-law was jailed and my mother-in-law was being harassed about our whereabouts. Our cattle were taken away by the police and the tenants were not allowed to plough our land. These were the government's ways of torturing the families of comrades who went underground. I was filled with sadness and anger. For a few minutes, I forgot that I was somewhere else and not in Andhra.

An expatriate Sikh lived in front of our house in Raipur. He was ill. My children knew Hindi, so my daughter became friends with him, calling him 'grandfather'. She wanted to give him her food. She used to fool us by not eating inside the house, saying that she wanted to eat sitting on the front porch. One day, a comrade followed her, suspecting that she was throwing away her food and found out the truth. We were happy to see the girl's kindness and gave her two extra idlis so that both of them could eat. She had been afraid that we would admonish her for what she did. As things turned out, she was pleased with our reaction and went to meet the Sardar. Unfortunately, he died the same day. It was raining when his community members took his body away. 'Grandfather will get wet. Why did they take him in this rain?' she asked us. A comrade told her that they took him to be fed, instead of revealing to her that dead people don't come back. From this point on, everyone stopped calling her Baby and began calling her Karuna instead.

A comrade and his family left the den after a month. I heard someone asking about their whereabouts. Aren't we expected to not ask such questions? But I did not interfere, as somebody might say that it was none of my business. A day later, I was told to be ready for the next move. Lolakshi was pregnant. They had already discontinued our servant maid citing financial reasons. I wondered if Lolakshi would be able to cook for so many people in the den. As they told me to pack only my clothes and that a holdall wasn't necessary, I concluded that I would be shifted to another den in the same town.

Rickshaws were still new to this town at that time. As our rickshaw went towards Raza Talaab, I thought I would be shifted to the old den where I had stayed before. However, the rickshaw went into another street in that direction. A comrade came with me (to create an impression that I was his wife). He stopped the rickshaw in front of a house and

took me in. I saw Kasturi, who had given birth to a son in Visakhapatnam, smiling at me. I asked her about her husband Subba Rao's whereabouts. She told me that he was on the terrace. Sitaramayya and another man called Vemulapalli Hanumantarao were in the adjoining room. Hanumantarao was one of the accused in the Madras Conspiracy Case along with Mohan Kumaramangalam.[41] He was not in good health. I guessed that he had come to this den to rest.

I stayed for ten days in that den, playing with Kasturi's child and preparing copies of party documents. One day, someone brought my children to meet me and later took me alone to the Guru Nanak den, where Raghava Rao and Lolakshi lived. I saw my mother there too. She stared at me, but did not come to hug me. I saw many questions in that look and was too unnerved to say anything. She then stroked my hair and said, 'Raghava Rao has caught smallpox. He is upstairs. Go and visit him.' I saw Raghava Rao suffering. There were vanishing marks of smallpox on Lolakshi's face too. She sat near him. My comrade, Sastri, said, 'These expatriates have brought contagious diseases with them. First, *chinnammai* [Lolakshi] caught smallpox. We feared that she might miscarry. Luckily her pregnancy was not affected, but Raghava Rao was infected instead. We could not afford to get good medical help. Since your mother expressed concern that your children might also catch smallpox, we sent them to your den. We also thought that Lolakshi might feel better if you and your mother were around. So, we brought your mother here first and then you.'

Sastri's words depressed me. We could visit people who were jailed and enquire about their well being. How do people living incognito handle these crises? I felt helpless. I took my *mangalasutram* and requested Sastri to sell it to buy food and medicines for Raghava Rao and Lolakshi. He refused saying, 'This is not the time to sit back and lament about these things.

We will not find rickshaws after 10 PM. We have to leave now, unnoticed.' So we left.

Vemulapalli Hanumantarao had brought a lot of good books and magazines with him. I never realised how time passed reading those books and talking with him. Karuna also enjoyed playing with Kasturi's child and listening to Hanumantarao's stories.

One day, my daughter said, 'Amma, uncle tells us nice stories. He also joins me in playing with the child. Let us just stay in this house without going anywhere.' Those were the days of underground lives. I felt sad that even our children had lost their freedom and said to myself, 'Your wish won't be fulfilled, child.' Another time, my son asked, 'Won't you take us to Ram *mamayya*? Where is our grandmother?' I could not answer him either.

Our children were shifted to another den. They also asked me to move. On the train, I noticed a few passengers from Chhattisgarh and some others who had migrated from Telangana to Madhya Pradesh. The train stopped at every station during the night. The holdall I was carrying was replaced with another in this journey as well. As the sun rose, the train stopped at a station called Gondiya. A courier received me there.

Gondiya

We travelled from the train station for about four furlongs (about half a mile) in a rickshaw before stopping in front of a big terraced house. It was a normal house with a few rooms, a hall and a kitchen. On going inside, I saw Lolakshi and Raghava Rao. They appeared to be in better health than when I had last seen them and I was relieved. I felt that there was room for about ten or fifteen comrades in this house. 'Perhaps, this den, like the one in Raipur, was one for the top brass,' I thought to myself. 'But Lolakshi is pregnant. Can she really

handle cooking for so many people? Even I am tired due to lack of sleep. How can we manage?'

The party's finances were poor, so we couldn't afford servant maids to clean, cook and provide us with nutritious food. I was hesitant to request household help. Anjaneya Sastri too seemed to think as I did. He informed the party about this.

When the owners of this house asked about our background, they were told that we were a business family that bought porcelain products from the factory in Gondiya and exported them to other cities. Thus, we were renting the house for business reasons. We had to create an impression with our neighbours that we were wealthy business people. So, although we slept on the floor, the main hall had a lot of furniture. Those who went out wore expensive clothes. Since we should also appear like wealthy people's wives, we needed servant maids. It is possible that our men asked the house owners to arrange a maid for us. They found a Chattisgarhi woman called Kalabatti. We could not afford to have her find out that the house was a den, so we thought of a strategy. We told her that we belonged to the Kshatriya caste and entry inside the house was forbidden for others. We asked her to wash our utensils and clean the front and back yards. As we did not have a common language, Kalabatti did as she was told and left without entering the house and without speaking much.

Rammohan Rao and my children came to our den without my mother. I did not know where my mother had gone and what she was doing. Our party leadership in those days was more concerned with the den's safety and about the struggle than about our families and children. Since a den with elders and children provides a good cover, they would take my mother and children into a den. They would not know my whereabouts and I would not know theirs. Perhaps it was done so that we would not be able to reveal where the others were even if we were caught and beaten up by the police.

I assumed that this was a strategy of safety adopted by the party management.

As Lolakshi entered the last phase of her pregnancy, I wondered how it would be for someone who has recovered from smallpox. Would it be possible to take her to a hospital? These thoughts scared me. Sastri understood and assured me that everything would be fine and that a female doctor would oversee the delivery. I never understood whether he had said this to calm me or if the party had some supporters in that area.

Sastri and I took Lolakshi to a hospital a short distance away from our den. A kind and friendly woman doctor delivered Lolakshi's baby. Pointing to the vanishing smallpox marks on the baby's body, the doctor said, 'The baby caught this because its mother had smallpox during her pregnancy. If the mother is lucky in surviving the attack, the child is luckier to survive it and enter this world.' Everyone looked at the baby in amazement. When we returned to the den, just as Lolakshi and I were addressed as *peddammai* and *chinnammai*, our respective daughters were called '*pedda* baby' and '*chinna* baby'.

My children, who were supposed to be studying at school, were wasting their lives in the den. After thinking about this, our elders suggested that Rammohan Rao teach them the alphabet and other basics. They also supplied him primary school textbooks for Telugu and Hindi. My son sang famous Hindi film songs of that era, like, *Chup chup khade ho zaroor koi baat hai* (You stand so quietly, surely there's something the matter) very well. Sastri listened to him and commented, 'My sister, your voice is now silent. But, hearing your son's voice, I am reminded of your Praja Natya Mandali days.'

Chandram, the person who was instrumental in my taking to the stage, once came to this den on party work. He spoke very little. 'Why is Chandram *thathayya* always sad and silent?' my daughter often asked. Chandram heard her one time and

asked her, 'Take me to the place where you play.' He went with her to Maharaja College and to the park. He came back and commented that we were probably denying the children a happy and carefree childhood. Sastri listened to this self-criticism in silence.

Chandram was expected to leave that night. But the comrade who had to get him money for the travel had not arrived yet, and Chandram and his courier did not have enough money. They talked, trying to figure a way out. Finally, I gave them the gold braid that bound my *mangalasutram* together so that it could fund their travel. 'Is this the same cord that you wanted to give away to buy my medicines in the past? It is a good thing that we did not use it then!' a comrade commented.

Gonds and tribals from the nearby forests came to Gondiya to sell fruit. Tasty *jambul* and wood-apple were available at low prices. We forgot our hunger when we ate them. At that time, our comrades ate rice for one meal and roti for the other. Kalabatti stared at us suspiciously when we bought cheap fruit every day and threw the peels and seeds into the trash can. I pointed out to one of our comrades that Kalabatti seemed suspicious, but he brushed it away replying that we suspect everything. He also said that we lacked my mother's savvy.

'How is that?' Lolakshi asked him.

'We once asked your mother's help in selling gold jewellery. She came with us to the shop wearing the jewellery and said to the shop keeper, "This is old-fashioned jewellery and my grandchildren are refusing to wear it. So, I have to sell it now." The shop keeper asked her, "Will you buy new jewellery?" She answered, "They will buy what they like. I will give this money to them."'

Lolakshi looked at me and said, 'Mother does not fear for her life and is working for the party even at this age.'

'I'm sure there are many more such mothers working for the party. All such mothers are mothers for the party,' I replied.

'You have understood,' Sastri said, thinking about Gorky's *Mother.*

As time went by, the couriers we knew, like Gangadhara Rao, Mallikarjuna Rao and Koteswara Rao did not visit our den. We were not given any carbon copying work. This place did not seem to have two or three dens as we had seen in Raipur. We knew that some meetings were organised upstairs, but never knew the details. Sastri took care of everything. But we could sense a sadness in their words and behaviour. Our people like Sitaramayya and Raghava Rao always seemed to be lost in thought and even forgot to eat on time.

On one of those days, I served Sastri with more mango dal as it was his favourite. Sitaramayya looked at me and said: 'Serve him more. He is a food lover.' Gurajada added 'Food gives us strength.' Sastri laughed. Sitaramayya continued, 'Yes, there is Gurujada's bracketed phrase in there too, "The muscled man is a rock." Sastri did not notice it.' All of us laughed. Sastri looked at me and said, *'Chinnammai*, it looks like we will have to ration our food. Let us both [referring to Sitaramayya and himself] combine our shares. Since I am more hungry, I need more food,' suggesting slyly that I should not feed Sitaramayya. We all laughed again. We were happy to laugh heartily after a very long time.

Although Sastri was joking, we did think such a scenario was plausible. We had already heard stories that some of our comrades were working as rickshaw pullers, construction workers and typing assistants. We understood that the reasons for the party's current plight were not purely financial. By then, thousands of party warriors and sympathisers had lost their lives in Telangana. Hundreds of young men in Andhra had lost their lives in Palaniappan's[42] police web, like so many Abhimanyus in a contemporary *Mahabharata.* The party had neither a way to go forward nor a desire to retreat. The leadership was in confusion. This was the reason for our comrades' lack of spirit.

QUITTING THE ARMED STRUGGLE

After a few days, we came to know that there were divergences in analyses of the fate of armed struggle in the party. While one group argued that we should stop as we did not have the strength to fight the Congress government, another was against it. Unable to come up with a solution, Chandra Rajeswara Rao, Makineni Basavapunnayya, Shripad Amrit Dange and Ajoy Kumar Ghosh went to Russia to discuss this matter with Stalin.[43]

After a month-long discussion under Stalin's leadership, they concluded that things were not in favour of a struggle, since India, with the ocean on three sides and the Himalayas on the fourth, was geographically positioned in a way that made armed support from other nations impossible. I learnt that our party had developed the Kishan Document[44] after these discussions in Russia. I hugged my children and wept. The realisation that our five-year underground life might end soon brought back several memories.

One day, Sastri bought a lot of provisions and told us that we would have important guests at our den. Chandra Rajeswara Rao, Savitramma, Dronavalli Anasuya (the wife of a martyr in the struggle) and two other comrades came. We treated them with hospitality. Anasuyamma was dressed as a widow. In empathy and sadness, we gave her a coloured sari and offered her vermilion. Savitramma told us how Potluri Sundaram surrendered to Palaniappan's ruthless strategy and harassment, and revealed the identity of several comrades who were later tortured by the police. I remembered that I had seen Sundaram in Eluru. In my imagination, he appeared before me with his pistol. I commented that he should have either shot those who captured him or shot himself instead of revealing everything. Savitramma responded, 'Warriors die but traitors don't.' Among Savitramma's list of martyrs was Narasimha Rao, who looked after me like a brother in Bandar.

I was angry, sad and depressed at the same time when I heard about his fate. Savitramma consoled me and Sastri told us that they had kept this news from me because they feared it would affect me.

'Are we just talking or can we also eat?' Rajeswara Rao asked. He also suggested that we should visit the porcelain factory in Gondiya. My children were very happy to hear this. When we visited the factory and walked among people, I felt this was the first step back to a normal life.

After a week, a semi-legal All India Communist Party meeting took place. Suggestions from the Comintern (Stalin) and from the All India Communist Party's reports were discussed. News about the cessation of the armed struggle and of the repeal of the ban on our party was all over the papers. Lolakshi read it and showed it to me. Sastri and Sitaramayya came back happily from the meeting and told us the same news. They told us that we would be in our homes in a week. Lolakshi and the children left the same day. Sitaramayya announced that there was no need to carry a holdall and a water bottle again. He asked me to pack my clothes and be ready for the journey.

I could not sleep in the train that night. As the sun rose, all the passengers turned towards it to offer their respects. I did so too. As the cold air of the dense forest touched me, I remembered that Telangana bordered this forest. 'This is Telangana's air,' I thought. The poet, Nanduri,[45] had written, 'Enki knows the language of flowers.' I thought, 'If great people could understand the language of the wind, they would know why our revolutionaries who started the fight died in the arms of this forest without seeing victory.' Thus went the rest of my journey.

AFTER UNDERGROUND LIFE

Sitaramayya got off at Visakhapatnam. The train moved on, as if it knew my desire to meet the widows of our martyrs who wrote history with their blood, and reached Vijayawada very soon. The streets appeared dull without our red flags. I walked in the general direction of the party office as fast as I could. A few minutes later, I found a house with the red flag on it. I enquired with a woman who was sweeping the streets and she confirmed that it was indeed the new Communist Party office. Without further ado, I went towards it.

I met a few comrades who worked with me four years ago. They were as surprised to see me as I was to see them. I was bombarded with questions even before I could open my mouth: Where are you coming from? How did you come? How did you travel alone up to this point? Though everyone says the ban has been lifted, the police still are capturing some of us—don't you know?

Fanning myself in this rain of questions, I entered the office. It felt as if I was coming home and my brothers were welcoming me. I thought of Bellapu Shobhanadri (a martyr), whom I addressed as 'brother' as I sat in the office. I asked the comrades who sat beside me about their families. Meanwhile, one comrade came in, looked at me and said, 'Someone has come for you. He is waiting with a rickshaw outside. Perhaps he has come to take you somewhere.'

The man who came for me now owned the house in which I stayed for a few days before exile. He was a relative of our courier, Koteswara Rao. As I went towards him, another comrade came out of the office along with me. 'How did you know that Koteswaramma would come here?' the comrade asked this man.

'Koteswara Rao informed me that she is coming alone today in the train from Visakhapatnam and I was asked to receive her. En route, I found out that plainclothes police

were following me. So I got off the train at Eluru and travelled by bus from there. I reached the railway station on time, but I was told that the train had come and left early. I searched the station, but could not find her. Seeing the red flag here, I guessed she would have come here.'

'Koteswara Rao stays near this gentleman's house. I will go there and come back to the office in the evening,' I told the other comrade and sat in the rickshaw that was waiting for us outside. My visitor joined me.

It was strange that I had come back to the same place from where my life in exile had begun. While I am not superstitious, I somehow found it mysterious.

I met Koteswara Rao in his house. 'Was the train late? Stay here for a few days. If there are no cases against you, the party will reintroduce you to the public in the Gudiwada *taluk*,' he told me.'I am now going out on some work.' After I had bathed, the house owner offered me a newspaper.

'When the ban on our party was still on, no newspaper dared to publish news about us, except *Janavani*,' he said. 'You must have seen that.' I took the newspaper from him, thinking he must be well-versed with party activities.

'They say 4,000 people were killed in the Telangana struggle. How many people died in Andhra?' I asked him.

'There might be more than 400. We do not know the details yet,' he replied.

'Doddi Komarayya was the first martyr who was killed by the Nizam's police forces in the Telangana struggle. I heard that Chintapalli Paparao was the first martyr to be killed by the Congress government's police force in Andhra. I don't have any more news. Can you please brief me about what you know?'

'Chintapalli Paparao was walking ahead of his courier. The police saw him and shot him near Musunuru in the night. They dropped his corpse on a road in Gannavaram. They showed their lathis and scared everyone who came near it.

They also threatened that all communists and sympathisers would be killed like that.

'They discovered some of the party's secret locations by terrorising people this way and shot other communists. They tried to find out our hideouts by hook or by crook. They branded Katuru and Elamarru as communist villages. They were barbaric, parading commoners naked around the Gandhi statue, beating them all the way and demanding that they give information about communists. You must have heard of this incident. The whole country was shocked. Communists like Tirumala Rao, Venkateswara Rao and others from this village were shot dead.

'They captured Anumarlapudi Sitaramarao and shot him with a pistol in the lock-up. Despite torture, they weren't able to extract any information from some people, so they just killed them and left their corpses in the bushes. They also planned to capture those who came to see the bodies. It is rumoured that most of the 400 martyrs are from Krishna district; eleven of these belonged to Bhatla Penumarru village alone. In one of the families, three men—the father, son and son-in-law—were all killed by the police. You probably know their names, Chalasani Jagannatha Rao, his son, Srinivasa Rao, and son-in-law, Venkateswara Rao. Though no one talks about these things in public, ordinary people are saddened by these stories.'

His words brought tears to my eyes.

PAYING TRIBUTE TO THE MARTYRS

I record some fragments of memory in tribute to my comrades who were killed in the struggle. Chalasani Jagannatha Rao and I had lived in the same den for some time. I addressed him as *babai* (father's brother) and he addressed me affectionately as *ammai* (daughter). He teased Sitaramayya by calling him his

son-in-law. He enjoyed my singing and often wondered how long we would be in that den.

Anumarlapudi Sitaramarao cooperated with me and another woman comrade, Tapi Rajamma, wherever we went in Tiruvuru *taluk* for our Mahila Sangham work. He was a man with a sense of humour. He always advised us to continue singing as it was a good medium for communication. When he came for lunch to the commune, he used to tease us by singing as a beggar does, showing his plate.

Our comrades used to say that Chintapalli Paparao was braver than even the Bobbili tiger, Tandra Paparayudu.[46] When we went to Buddhavaram in Gannavaram *taluk*, we never returned without having a meal at Paparao's house. He was part of the first cultural squad assembled in Gunadala.[47] He participated in the group song event with us at the first conference of the party (Vijayawada).

I thought of all these martyred comrades. I wanted to do something in their memory. I thought about offering my red salute to all of them. It occurred to me that I should write and sing songs about them. But I did not know how to compose music, I am not creative enough. I did not lose hope. I remembered the song, 'Our country is India. We are Indians', which we used to sing, and began writing about our three comrades in this tune, starting with, 'We are from the Telugu land, ours is the Telugu lineage'. Those few days I spent in this house passed like a few hours. Then Koteswara Rao came back and took me along with him.

The party leadership announced my return to public life by inviting me on stage at Dantakurru in Gudiwada *taluk*. Many other communists came out like this later. We heard that the party founders were also coming back to civic life. I felt that our leaders coming back to Vijayawada was like the Pandavas' return to Hastinapur after their life in exile in the forests. This was the city in which they shook hands with socialism; the city that they had filled with red flags; the city

that ended rowdyism in an enlightened youth; the city that was then a communist bastion.

As I expected, one fine day, Chandra Rajeswara Rao, Pucchalapalli Sundarayya, Maddukuri Chandram, Makineni Basavapunnayya and Chalasani Vasudeva Rao appeared on a stage decorated with red flags in Vijayawada. Indrakiladri[48] reverberated with the voice of the common people's tribute to martyrs and with the praise showered on our leaders. The eyes of our Mother, the Telugu culture, filled with happiness.

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Some of our comrades contested the 1952 elections from jail. Along with the party leaders, we women too campaigned, telling people about the sacrifices of our party's martyrs and the imprisonment of our candidates. I wanted to know when Rajamma, my old comrade, would join us from Chennai for this election campaign. So I went to the party office, where the office manager informed me that Rajamma would arrive in two days. He suggested that I accompany Parvathi Krishnan, a party leader from Chennai, in the campaign till then. 'She is a well-read person and the sister of comrade Mohan Kumaramangalam,' he said.

I was hesitant. 'Will I get along with her? She doesn't speak Telugu and I don't speak Tamil. Can we campaign together?'

'She knows a little bit of Hindi. You too can manage some Hindi (I had learnt some during our life underground). So it is not an issue. She will adjust to the circumstances,' my comrade assured me.

The jeep arrived at our office. Three comrades were in the back and Parvathi was sitting with the driver in the front row. Now, the jeep took only four people, so where was I supposed to sit? I just stood there not knowing what to do. I thought that she would ask a comrade to get off so that I could get in. Instead, she moved aside and asked me to sit beside her. Since

I was thin, I fit in that small place like a shrunken pigeon, like a daughter sitting on her mother's lap. She patted my shoulder and said, 'Our party cannot afford to give us another vehicle in this scenario. We have to adjust.'

She communicated in her broken Hindi and frequently asked me to sing a song before a speech. Even before the comrades invited me on to the dais, she would wave to call me over. Though she did not completely understand what I sang, she always responded cheerfully, saying that she had understood the essence. Before she left for Madras, she gave me a book of progressive songs as a memento of our short friendship. I thought how nice it would have been if all the leaders were like her. I felt glad that I had not forgotten the songs and the little Hindi I knew.

A day later, I went to the party office after hearing about Rajamma's arrival. One of the comrades at the office told me that she had gone to Katragadda Hanumayamma's house and that both of us should go with Chalasani Vasudeva Rao to sing at an open meeting of the party in a village near Veerullapadu of Nandigama *taluk*. The name Veerullapadu brought back memories of my comrade Varamalleswari and those days of working with her in that area.

Didn't I tell you that every *taluk* in Krishna district had one or two red villages? They were party strongholds. Veerullapadu was one such village. The playwright, Vasireddy Bhaskara Rao, who Rajamma greatly respected, belonged to this village. Bhaskara Rao wrote plays like *Maa Bhoomi* (Our Land) along with Sunkara.[49] Rajamma had played the role of Sitamma in this play.

This village and the ones surrounding it had a lot of Pedda Kamma[50] families with surnames like Vasireddi, Vattikonda and Patibandla. They thought themselves superior to other Kamma, Kapu and Reddy families. Visitors were fed on leaf plates instead of on steel plates. One day, during my previous

stint at this village, Varamalleswari and I went to a Pedda Kamma-dominated village to ask people to join our Mahila Sangham. We enrolled ten party members and they arranged lunch for us at one of the Pedda Kamma houses. Varamalleswari had earlier advised me 'The landlady will ask you if you belong to the Pedda Kamma caste. When she finds out that you do not, she will give you food on a leaf plate. She might insult you. She might also question me for not informing her earlier. So, without raising your voice, simply eat your food.' I learnt once again how serious caste differences were.

Now, once again, I set out for Veerullapadu, this time with Rajamma. Both us sat in the back of the jeep and chatted. Rajamma told me that I was better informed about Nandigama *taluk* than she was. I agreed and narrated the incident with Varamalleswari. Rajamma laughed, 'As if caste is not enough, these people care about sub-castes too!'

Chalasani Vasudeva Rao, who was sitting in the front, suggested that we prepare ourselves for the songs and discussions as we were approaching the village. We agreed. Later, we went on stage. Rajamma and I sang a patriotic song to start off. Vasudeva Rao and another comrade delivered thought-provoking speeches. After many songs and speeches, the villagers invited Rajamma and me for lunch and took us to a house. Rajamma wanted to invite the jeep driver to dine with us and went to call him.

Our comrade had informed the landlady that she should prepare lunch for three people. She arranged leaf plates for two people on the porch and a plate for one person inside the house. She asked me to come in and asked Rajamma and our driver to eat on the porch. I was shocked and asked her, 'Were you told that they are not Pedda Kammas?' She said, 'I thought that that woman belongs to the Mala caste and you seem to be a Brahmin. Aren't you prohibited from sitting beside her?'

I felt as if someone had hit my heart with a hammer. Jashuva's[51] lines, 'The four-headed Hindu snake-king hisses furiously at this touch,' rang in my mind and I wondered, 'One group sends people away saying that even sharing the same air pollutes them, while another group practises untouchability based on colour and appearance.'

'Who told you that I am Brahmin?' I asked her.

'My husband told me not to cook eggs today as a Brahmin would visit us. I thought that you are the one since you have a fairer complexion and are wearing a voile sari,' she replied.

'I am not a Brahmin. She is the Brahmin. She would neither come to your house nor eat here if she knew about your beliefs,' I told her. I suggested that she feed the three of us together.

Right then, Rajamma entered the house, saying, 'How long will you keep chatting with her? We should go to Vijayawada quickly. Did you forget that? Let us have lunch.' I don't know what the landlady thought, but she arranged for another leaf plate and fed all of us together.

I narrated this incident to my comrades later and spoke about how bad I felt. Rajamma interrupted me and said, 'When I roamed around without following Brahminical rules as a child, our relatives used to ask my mother, "You are fair skinned. How did you give birth to this dark girl?" My mother used to reply, "A Mala foetus must have accidentally fallen into my womb." When they told me to go to the temple to listen to god's prayers, I went to our neighbour's house to read the *Prajasakti* magazine.[52] When my mother heard of this, she would say, "She has acquired all Sudra habits." I have never bothered about such comments even when my own mother made them. Why bother when these people do?'

Vasudeva Rao replied, 'Things are changing now compared to your childhood. But it does hurt when we hear such remarks in party sympathisers' homes, doesn't it?'

'These experiences make us think. They enlighten us,' Rajamma responded. I agreed with her to an extent. Novels like Unnava's *Malapalli*, poems like Jashua's *Gabbilam*, and social movies like Gudavalli Ramabrahmam's[53] *Malapilla*, *Raitu Bidda*, *Sumangali* and *Gruhapravesham* contributed to some societal change, I thought to myself. I wanted to see more of such literature and culture that would change society.

Our candidates were extremely successful in the 1952 elections, defeating even ministers from the Congress Party. The Communist Party was in the first place, followed by the Congress. Telangana's leader, Raavi Narayanareddy, won a higher number of votes than even Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. All of us who campaigned for the party paid homage to our martyrs and consoled their widows.

CAMPAIGN IN UTTARANDHRA

We spoke about the sacrifices of our martyrs on stage during the 1952 election campaign. In a similar vein, we sang songs about our martyrs during the 1955 campaign. Rajamma and I frequently sang a song I had written, '*Manadi Telugu deshamamma*' (Ours is the sweet Telugu land).

Koganti Govinda Rao and Jonnalagadda Vallabha Rao were the party candidates from Uttarandhra during the 1955 elections. Manikonda Suryavathi, Tapi Rajamma and I were chosen as volunteers for this campaign, so the three of us prepared to go there. As we boarded the train and settled down, Gurajada came to mind. We were travelling to the place where he was born, had worked and died. I recalled the patriotic songs he had written and his lyrical stories about Kanyaka and Purnamma. Memories of a meeting we had organised at Vijayawada to commemorate Gurajada's death anniversary and what Maddukuri Chandram had said about this great poet flooded me.

Sitting in the train, I thought that just as Sri Krishnadevaraya was immortalised in the ruins of the Vijayanagar empire at Hampi, Vizianagaram's Gurajada would continue to shine in the literary skies as long as the nation is not destroyed and as long as people live here.[54] If the Vijayanagar emperor had brought glory to our ancient epics, the king of poets from Vizianagaram had celebrated Telugu by giving us modern poetry like his *Mutyala Saralu*.

When we reached Vizianagaram, we wanted to visit Gurajada's house and the fort of Ananda Gajapati Raja, the king who had helped him, and see for ourselves the artistic glory of that era as depicted in the fort.

The train stopped at Visakhapatnam. The party had sent a jeep with two comrades to receive us. Delighted to visit Uttarandhra, we went to the party office. 'Our party is participating in this election on public donations. Let us also live up to that affection we have received from people,' Suryavathi suggested. So, we decided to cut campaign expenses by eating whatever we got from people and resting in their houses.

'Today, we are going towards Mandasa,' the comrade who had received us announced. When we asked him what was special about this place, he said, 'Once upon a time, the zamindar of Mandasa harassed the farmers who were already suffering because of a bad crop season by demanding more taxes. Unable to bear the combined attack of hunger and taxes, the farmers revolted. The zamindar ordered that the protesters be shot. In the firing that ensued, six farmers, including a woman called Gunnamma, were killed.' When they saw we were interested in the history of this place, our comrades took us to Mandasa fort. When I saw the zamindar's fort and the place where the martyrs' bodies were displayed back then, I was reminded of the Gajullanka struggle in my district, its woman martyr, Veeyamma, and the brave woman from Telangana, Ailamma.

'Our mother Telugu has given birth to such brave women! We are Telugus. Ours is the Telugu nation.' These lines from

my song involuntarily rushed out of my mouth. I felt that my song could be sung everywhere in the state, not just in Krishna district. While I continued to be lost in thought, our comrades reminded us that we should leave the fort soon to reach our venue on time.

Our comrades frequently took us to the villages that the party had decided to campaign in. We learnt about several new customs and proverbs during these visits. Some of the village women did not wear blouses beneath their saris. When we asked them why, they told us that it was their tradition—and that even modern women among them didn't wear them for fear of community anger.

Our organisations stopped many unjust and shameful practices. We suggested that our first priority should be to focus on this custom where women are not allowed to wear a blouse. We told all the women this during our campaign and were very happy when some of them came wearing blouses the next day.

I learnt proverbs used by local people, like:

- Even if we burn and slash and practise *podu* agriculture, we cannot fill our stomachs.
- Going to Burma as if to earn a livelihood.
- Planning for a trip to Simhachalam without a single penny in hand.

I was reminded once again that proverbs are actually mirrors of social reality.

We remembered a song and thought Gurajada would have written it after seeing the poverty in this region:

Toil
For abundance in yield
Food makes muscle
One who has muscle is the real man!

If men are distressed
How will the country prosper?
Hurry! Learn the arts and skills
Make all goods here.

During the day, we campaigned from house to house, learning the local culture and history. In the night, we lectured in the open meetings and sang songs. For lunch or dinner, our comrades took us to whoever they knew in that village. The women of the house always gave us a warm welcome. Most of the time, we were served fish or prawn curry. When these were not available, they served a curry prepared by mixing dried fish or prawns with brinjal or snake gourd. At some places, they also gave us *pulusu* (a thin, sour 'soup'). We never found dal, pickles or buttermilk in this region. Neither Rajamma nor I had tasted meat or fish. Though Suryavathi ate meat, she did not like their food. We didn't know what to do, since the women would be hurt if we refused to eat. So we just ate rice with *pulusu* for lunch.

One day, Suryavathi saved us by informing one of the householders that we had already eaten at another place and thanked them for their hospitality. Our food became a problem for our comrades. They instructed our driver to go where we could find jaggery, sugarcane and coconuts. We ate sugarcane, drank coconut water and ate the coconut pieces. This made us happier than eating *pulihora* (spiced tamarind rice) and *perugannam* (curd rice). We hoped that we would find such food all through the week.

On the last day of our campaign, our comrade announced that we would visit Barua. He also warned us that this was Gouthu Lacchanna's[55] native village and the Congress youth were planning to insult us. Rajamma responded that it was also the home of the progressive poet, Setti Eeswara Rao. We also reminded the others that Lacchanna had collaborated with our comrades in the Raitu Rakshana Yatra (Farmer Protection March).

We decided to sing the following song at all our open-air meetings:

Leaders from Icchapuram went to Madras on foot to fight
Hoist now the flag on their name
Peasant brothers, stand together under the flag
And fight the oppressor.

Our comrades suggested we should also sing *Manadi Telugu deshamamma*. They also told me that a young priest had liked the songs very much and wanted to write down the lyrics. I obliged.

We held a women's meeting in one of the sympathisers' homes in Barua. Ten people attended. Suryavathi spoke about contemporary women's life and about the right to vote. We sang the songs we planned to sing. Our comrades introduced us to the local women saying Rajamma was Tapi Dharmarao's[56] daughter-in-law. They were kind to us. 'Some people told us that you are irreverent women who have left your husbands and gone out spreading communism the way nuns spread Christianity,' they said. 'But, after looking at you, we think they were lying.' We thanked them for understanding us.

Many more people attended the outdoor meeting that night. As planned, Suryavathi delivered a speech, and Rajamma and I sang songs. The meeting was a success.

Before leaving, we thanked the comrades and our jeep driver who treated us like family, and asked them not to forget our friendship. We told them that we would first go to Vizianagaram and leave for Vijayawada after the election results were announced.

CAMPAIGN IN RAYALASEEMA

I once went on a campaign in the Rayalaseema region during one of the elections. Gajjala Mallareddy[57] and Eeswara Reddy

took me. Nagalla Rajeswaramma came along with us. We also went there to build Mahila Sanghams. The women heard our speeches and the *burrakatha*[58] performed by girls with great interest. We learnt several things from them as well and understood that the women in this region were being oppressed in the name of custom and tradition. People would point fingers at women who wore footwear or went outside the house. If she tucked her sari end in her waist, they would ask, 'Who are you fighting now?' Despite all this, I liked the hospitality of the people in this region and their sweet dialect, which I noticed had many authentic Telugu words.

MALE DOMINATION IN THE PARTY

Our party introduced us to the concept of equality. They told us that a man, a woman or a Dalit are all equal. They did not stop there. They brought us out of our houses into public spaces. We could do what we did only because of the freedom our party gave its women. But male chauvinism surfaced when any woman overtook men in anything. There was no particular animosity or suppression, just an automatic reaction. But weren't our party men too from the same society? It would take time for these feelings of superiority to go. The party believed that these differences would vanish automatically when we built an equal society. No doubt, our party men were better than other men.

LIVING IN OUR OWN HOUSE

Sitaramayya began working as party secretary for Krishna district, but we faced financial difficulties even after coming out in the open. We had some land in Lingavaram in his parents' name and some other land in my name. Sitaramayya wanted to sell both these to buy a plot in Ghanapuram near Mulugu *mandal*[59] of Warangal district. His friends and relatives

also had the same opinion. Assessing that we could buy more land in Ghanapuram in return for our land in Lingavaram, prosper and also have other relatives around us, my parents-in-law agreed to the proposal. Thus, they left their native place and moved to Warangal. It was decided that we would remain in Vijayawada.

Chandu joined high school and Karuna also started to go to school. They were smart students and scored good marks without the need for private tuitions. Some of our Praja Natya Mandali artists and progressive writers migrated to Madras as they had got opportunities in the film industry during the time of the ban on our party. Sunkara, who co-wrote *Maa Bhoomi* and *Mundadugu* (A Step Forward), also spent some time in Madras. On the advice of the Katragaddas (an influential Kamma family in Vijayawada), he and his brothers started living with their families in the hilly area near Mogalrajapuram, clearing the area and building huts with palm leaves. Sitaramayya and Sunkara were good friends. They treated each other like brothers-in-law. So, Sitaramayya also had a patch of land cleared and built two huts there. We lived in one of them and Raghava Rao's family lived in the other. These houses were far away from the town. There was no road and, hence, no buses. Yet our children, who had been denied school life till then, happily travelled to their school every day without complaining about the trek.

Several comrades visited Sitaramayya regularly. If four of them came together instead of the expected two on any day, they ate the food my mother had prepared for only two, along with the fruit they brought with them. Comrades of those days behaved in this fashion. As Sunkara lived next door, he frequently visited Sitaramayya and they discussed drama. Sunkara told us that he was writing a play *Bhumi Kosam* (For Land) on the lines of *Maa Bhoomi*. Sitaramayya reminded him of the days when they had rehearsed for *Maa Bhoomi* in his

village, Lingavaram, and expressed a desire that *Bhumi Kosam* should also be written in a way that would be easy for new artists to perform. Arrangements were made to get an actor named Banerjee from Tiruvuru for this play, just like the actor Vallam Narasimha Rao had once come from the same Tiruvuru for *Maa Bhoomi*. *Bhumi Kosam* was ready under the direction of Makineni Venkateswara Rao. Sunkara, a few new actors and I played all the roles.

Our first performance was at Kankipadu. Spectators commented that the Praja Natya Mandali was regaining its old shine. Everyone complimented Sunkara; some said that Sitaramayya had always been a patron of drama even though he was not an actor. Drama critic, Gopala Krishna, and film director, Tilak, appreciated the play. They also offered to make a movie of it and invited Sunkara to Madras (I do not remember who among them invited him). There was, thus, a break in our drama performance.

But the women's troupe led by Vardhanamma and the men's troupe led by Banerjee practised and started to perform Sunkara's *burrakatha* titled *Rudrama Devi* in our house and brought some fame to the Praja Natya Mandali. I participated in the women's association activities along with this girls' troupe.

My mother took care of my children and our household chores, and was happy that we were finally settling down. Meanwhile, my father-in-law sent a message requesting us to send my mother to Warangal so that my mother-in-law, who was afraid to stay alone near the fields when he went out to work, would have some company. I doubted if I could handle household work, children and party activities without my mother's assistance. Sitaramayya said, 'I agree. But my father might be hurt that we did not help him when he was in need. Think about it.' My mother also said, 'I like staying near the fields. Let me go there for a few days.' So we sent her to live with my mother-in-law.

QUARRELS WITH SITARAMAYYA

During our days in exile, party elders spoke about Sitaramayya as one with a strong hold on socialist ideology and a great orator. A few martyrs' widows addressed him as *bhai ji* (respected brother) when we lived in Gondia. They continued to address him thus even after coming out of exile. Others too now began calling him that. Sitaramayya treated all of them like his sisters. He thought that we should respect them as their husbands had died for the sake of our country.

There was a woman among them who served the party when we were underground and also in the elections later despite her ill health. Other martyrs' widows called her *akka* (older sister). Sitaramayya told me that she was prone to fits and doctors had advised her to rest where she would be treated with care and kindness. By that time, there were signs of a split in the party and confusion about where to keep her. The party felt it would be best to send her to a comrade's house. Sitaramayya asked me, 'If she is interested in staying with us, shall we invite her here?' I agreed and promised him that I would do my best to make her feel comfortable.

Peddabbai expressed his doubts. 'She is used to luxury. She is a rich woman... and you are a person who adjusts to circumstances. Can she live with you?'

I replied, 'Isn't she a revolutionary? She can survive, don't worry.' She had stayed with me for two days in exile earlier. I had treated her with love and affection, as she was the widow of a martyr. I thought that it was because of this that she wanted to stay with us and consented happily.

She had two children and they came along with her. Days passed. Her children called me 'mother', but called her by her name. They mingled with my children easily and lived without any complaints. Her fits increased after coming to our house. She would fall down suddenly. I did not have the strength to lift her up and put her back on the bed. When

Sitaramayya was there, I would ask him to do so. Otherwise, I would simply place pillows under her arms and legs to prevent any injuries. 'Why does she fall down so frequently? Are you taking care of her?' Sitaramayya asked pointedly. I was hurt.

Differences in the party did not stop at political criticism. They reached a personal level. As my mother did not live with me now, I had little time to go out and work. Further, Sitaramayya began suggesting that I should not visit people who had differences with him. As I was not in favour of a split in the party, I wanted to visit everyone, speak with everyone. Then I came to know that both sides were gossiping about our family. One of them had started saying that I was giving *akka* shelter not out of respect for the party, but because I wanted her money. The other group asked: 'Why should she express a desire to go to Sitaramayya's house among all the comrades?'

On the one hand, Sitaramayya accused me of not taking care of her. On the other, the party people accused me of coveting her money. I felt terrible about the turn of events. Perhaps she understood my predicament or perhaps she even heard those rumours, for she left our house. Her children wanted to stay with us, but I convinced them that they needed to take care of their mother, assuring them that they could visit me anytime they wanted. Her move prompted more gossip and criticism. Even those who I counted as close friends questioned me. *Peddabbai* too asked me why she had gone.

'My mother who usually takes care of my children is now in the fields in Warangal. Sitaramayya is too busy in party activities to think about the house. Since I have to handle everything at home, it is likely I may not have given enough attention to her,' I said.

'If that is the only reason, then there is nothing to worry about,' he replied. However, his tone implied that there were other reasons underlying his enquiry.

Party members from both groups did not visit our house as frequently as they used to. I too stopped going to theirs as Sitaramayya did not like it. He began taking less and less interest in our home affairs. He rarely spoke to me. If he was home for a day, he stayed away for two.

I wanted to discuss this issue with the party, but it had its own problems to handle. Who would care about me now? I took the advice of Manikonda Suryavathi and Rajamma at that time. Meanwhile, the party suggested that Sitaramayya move to Rayalaseema for a few days to solve all these problems. Sitaramayya refused, saying, 'Why should I go? Will these rumours about my extramarital affair disappear if I go there?' He was dismissed from the party. What could they ask him to do?

THE STRING BREAKS

One day, I accosted Sitaramayya when the children were not at home. 'My mother is not here. You never come here and you are always with that woman. What should I tell visitors? How should I run the household?' I asked him. Sitaramayya stared at me strangely and said, 'Are you asking me this question on your own or did someone put you up to it? She is a revolutionary. She has served the struggle. She is a great person who campaigned for us in the elections despite her ill health. Everyone respects her. Are you jealous now? You suspect her because I move closely with her. You were once a widow. Yet, I married you and gave you some recognition in society. I too can suspect your fidelity if you move closely with someone, can't I?'

Those words hit me hard. I remembered his promises during our wedding. The Sitaramayya I saw that day was not the same person who kissed my forehead and said, 'I can see your pure heart through your innocent eyes. It gives me courage to succeed in my mission. So, I decided to discard my

brahmacharya [oath of celibacy]. I want to spend the rest of my life happily looking into your eyes.' In pain now, I wanted to ask him several other things, but he just said, 'I do not want to see your sad face,' and left.

Sitaramayya's father visited us about a week or so later, bringing with him some sesame grown in our fields. 'I heard that another woman is living with you. Isn't she here?' he enquired. I told him that she had left our house. He stayed for two days. Sitaramayya did not come home during this time. His father returned home without seeing his son. I asked him to send my mother back. But I couldn't control my tears. 'Why do you cry, child?,' he said. 'We have had a good yield this year. Let us all live there happily from now on. He prefers party to family. I am leaving without seeing him. Don't worry too much.'

'I can't live alone. Please send my mother,' I reminded him again.

The distance between us grew. This news reached the party cadre, who were about to split. It soon reached the party office. I do not know if the party discussed this issue or questioned Sitaramayya. He came home one night, packed all the luggage he wanted in a lorry and said, without looking at me, 'You and Karuna live in this house. Chandu and I will stay in another place. This is our party's decision.' He left the house at midnight. I was shocked and cried loudly, looking at my sleeping children. Chandu woke up and asked me why I was crying.

'Your father has left us,' I told him.

'But he always goes out, doesn't he? Shut the doors and sleep,' he said.

I thought about the Sitaramayya who had confronted his parents in Jonnapadu for my sake and returned there to set up a school. He had abandoned his parents for me back then. Now, he was abandoning me as I was an obstacle in his path.

The stubborn Sitaramayya would not even pity me, I thought. I lay writhing in pain till the children woke up.

Sitaramayya's father understood my loneliness and probably got to know about our break-up. He sent my mother to live with us. That alleviated my distress.

Sitaramayya sent Chandu to Madras to study and moved from Vijayawada to Warangal. He brought his mother from the village to live with him. I heard that the woman who had stayed with us had moved along with her children into Sitaramayya's house.

Meanwhile, Karuna finished her ninth grade. I had no idea how to pay for her higher education amidst my financial troubles. My mother started to sell the silverware we had bought for Chandu and Karuna in their childhood. Sitaramayya sent a message inviting Karuna to his home for a vacation. I was apprehensive as that woman had fits. My mother told me not to worry, saying, 'Her grandmother also lives there. Daughters love their fathers. Remember your childhood? Send Karuna to her father.'

Karuna went to Warangal. She must have informed Sitaramayya about the situation at our house, or perhaps he figured it out. He sent a message saying, 'Karuna will study in Warangal from now on and visit Vijayawada during the vacations.'

I was now alone even though I had a husband. Now I was the unlucky person who had children but could not spend time with them.

Our party learnt about my financial condition and decided to give me five thousand rupees in return for the fifty sovereigns of gold I had donated during our days in exile. Manikonda Suryavathi told me to accept it without inhibitions. She also offered one thousand rupees as a loan, but I refused.

In those days, I had thought that my children would come back to me after finishing their education in another three or four years, so I did not want any help from Sitaramayya.

I did not ask him also because he had been expelled from the party and I was still a member then. But I was not in a position to pay my membership dues.

Meanwhile, Sitaramayya sent several letters suggesting that I should not take the party's help. He threatened that he would completely relinquish the responsibility of our children to me if I took their support. He was a stubborn man and capable of acting on his ideas. So I decided to suffer for the sake of my children's happiness and did not take the five thousand rupees from the party. Thus, he neither helped me nor did he allow the party to do so.

These unforeseen events ruined my domestic life. I could not get a job because I had no higher education—I had stopped my studies on my own. I wanted Karuna to study without a break. I fought my desire to keep her with me since I wanted her dream of becoming a doctor to come true.

LIFE AHEAD

Friends who heard about my decision to not take the party's help asked me, 'We heard that he sold the land that was in your and your mother's name and bought more land in Warangal. Why don't you ask for a share in the yield?' But my mother's wisdom spoke otherwise, 'He took the money from the jewellery your parents gave you. Will he now give a share in the land they gave you? If he does, will the income from it be sufficient to feed and educate your children? If you ask for a share, he will ask you to take care of the children as well. Can the children live without their father? Don't waste your time on useless thoughts.'

The party's split was imminent now, following our family's. I grieved and cried for the party—there was Sundarayya on one side and Rajeswara Rao on the other. Which side should I take when I respected both of them? Who would understand my problems now? This, along with my financial troubles,

stressed me out completely. My mother and I decided to rent out two rooms in our house and stay in one room ourselves. My mother started to grow vegetables and flowers in our garden. She was able to sell these at the Labbipet market and earn some money to get food for us.

We thought that Karuna was better off at her father's place than starving here with us. However, some people mocked me, saying that I had left not just my husband, but also my children. Some others commented that because 'that woman' had money, I had left my children to study at her expense. I also heard comments suspecting my conduct since both my husband and children had left me. Rajamma advised me to ignore such remarks. Not everyone who worked for the party had a completely Marxist perspective. There were both good people and bad.

Sundarayya was both a kind and humane Marxist. Perhaps, this had been the reason for my closeness to him. Any human being needs these qualities. Else, what was I to him, or to Sugunamma of the Andhra Mahila Sabha who would help me so much in the future or to Durgabai Deshmukh who started the Andhra Mahila Sabha, for that matter? Some people called me a useless woman, citing examples of women who put up with everything and stayed with their husbands for the sake of their children. It seems to me that people in distress are a source of amusement for the carefree. Despite all this, Tapi Rajamma and Manikonda Suryavathi visited me frequently and asked about my well-being. They kept me informed about party decisions and shared some documents with me. After the party split, neither of the groups called me.

EVEN THE PARTY HAS CASTE

Our house, which was once a beehive of activity with comrades and artists from the Praja Natya Mandali, looked empty after Sitaramayya's departure. I felt the pain of both poverty and

loneliness. As I said before, we rented out a part of our house to make ends meet. I was relieved to see that our tenants were kind hearted and hoped that they would stay with us longer, but they shifted to another city soon. I was sad looking at the empty house. My mother told people in our neighbourhood about the vacancy and started looking for prospective tenants.

At that time, Satyamurthy[60] (Sivasagar) was working for the party magazine. As he wanted to shift his base from Gudiwada to Vijayawada and was looking for a house to stay in, he approached us. I knew that Satyamurthy was a progressive who lived by the party's ideology, and agreed to rent the house to him. He moved in with his wife, Manemma, son, Siddhartha, and brother, Carry. Our neighbours noticed. Those who thought they were superior to him, approached me and asked, 'Do you know who he is? He should be living in a Mala hamlet. He seems happy and triumphant that he has managed to live among us. When your mother informed us of this vacancy, we wanted to suggest someone from our community. He knows that no one will rent him a house in the city. He must have approached you because you are in dire need of money and would not mind renting out to him. So, you agreed for the sake of money, didn't you?'

'If an untouchable is your tenant, we will not visit your house from tomorrow,' said another.

'If they vacate the house, unable to handle our strict rules of cleanliness, no one will approach you to rent the house,' threatened another.

I could not reply 'My house, my wish! Who are you to ask me?' I was worried that Satyamurthy might hear them. I also thought that these neighbours dared to speak to me this way only because my husband had left me, and was happy that my mother or Manemma weren't around when these conversations happened. Helpless, I visited Rajamma.

'Dasari Nagabhushanam married Paripurna. Sesharatnam married Tirupathi from Jonnapadu. In spite of this, our people

have caste feelings. Try to understand how strong and deep rooted caste is in our society,' Rajamma said. 'Satyamurthy is a kind man, a socialist and a thinker. He will not heed these insults. It is good for both of you that he is staying in your house.' She also told me the story of how society had harassed Guntur Bapanaiah, a Scheduled Caste, and how our party youth had helped him; she suggested that Satyamurthy too would live through this difficulty and prosper.

Rajamma's husband, Mohana Rao, heard our conversation and said, 'Some of the bad customs from Hinduism continue to exist despite so much effort to eradicate them. I was glad to know Satyamurthy stays at your house. He came to work in *Visalandhra* because of his passion for the cause. Did you see the paper today?' He casually handed the newspaper to me. Rajamma suggested that I go home as my mother would be waiting for me.

THE ANDHRA MAHILA SABHA AND MY EDUCATION

Mohana Rao worked in the newspaper *Visalandhra*. He showed me an advertisement by the Andhra Mahila Sabha in that paper, announcing that they would coach widowed and orphaned women to pass the matriculation examination. This training would be conducted in Hyderabad. When I showed interest, he got the application forms and also made some effort to secure an admission for me. My mother cried, saying, 'Karuna left her mother and went to her father. Now, do you want to leave your mother and go to the Andhra Mahila Sabha?' She also recalled how I refused to go to school during my childhood.

But was there a choice? I controlled my tears and left for Hyderabad—that was in 1961 or 1962. I found twenty more women like me in the hostel. I thought, 'It was after starting to participate in the struggle that Durgabai Deshmukh educated herself. She wants women to be educated and financially

independent after reflecting on the experiences of her own life. It is for this reason she established these organisations to educate adult women.' I wrote a letter to Rajamma telling her that I had become one of the several women studying for matriculation. She wrote back that her father-in-law, Tapi Dharmarao, saw her emotional upheaval after reading my letter and he suggested that I write a short story out of this experience.

Bhaskara Rao, who lived at Sundarayya's house, signed on as my local guardian. My acquaintances like Neelam Rajasekhara Reddy's[61] wife and Tarimela Nagi Reddy's sister, Leela, frequently visited me. All of them encouraged me to complete my studies, enrol in a teachers' training course, start living on my own and support my children. I always thought of my children and expected that they would return to me in a year or two.

'A MOTHER'S STORY'

I wrote a short story titled 'A Mother's Story' based on my letter to Rajamma and sent it to the magazine *Andhra Prabha*. The editor, Vidwan Viswam, published it and sent a remuneration of ten rupees for me through Rajamma, along with a message encouraging me to write more often. At that stage of my life, ten rupees seemed like a thousand rupees. I was very happy and wrote another story in that excitement. It was called 'What Shall I Write?'. The magazine *Abhyudaya* published it. This encouraged me even more, but I worried that my studies would be affected, so I dropped the idea of writing. Instead, I studied seriously. My fellow students called me *akka* and shared their woes with me. The Andhra Mahila Sabha's president, Sugunamani, was also kind to me. I paid my hostel fees with the government stipend I received, but meeting other expenses was difficult. I did not want to take help from my friends.

One day, a comrade called Kambhampati Satyanarayana[62] offered me ten rupees to help me out. I refused to take this and asked him to suggest ways for me to stand on my feet instead. He appreciated my response and warned me not to take help from people who gave me ten rupees and declared outside that they had given me a hundred. I decided to follow his advice.

Radio Annayya and Radio Akkayya[63] frequently attended the Andhra Mahila Sabha's programmes. Sugunamani introduced me to them and I got an opportunity to participate in radio plays and dramas through them. I earned fifteen rupees for shorter plays and forty rupees for long dramas. They gave us the cheque soon after the play was recorded. The sight of these cheques gave me a lot of hope for the future.

Gopichand[64] worked in All India Radio in those days. He used to say, 'Complete your matriculation and I will appoint you as Radio Chinnakka.' The people in that organisation were kind. Sarada Srinivasan[65] and her sister were also my friends. She thought I was a Brahmin and joked with me sometimes, 'See how our Brahmins behave in this scenario.' There are times when we are so worried and insecure about losing the money we must earn that we cannot reveal the truth of our caste. In those days, the money from those programmes was necessary to support myself. I could not go and work on a daily wage at my age of thirty-six anyway. So I used to listen to her without saying anything. This was the same reason I could not say, 'This is my house. I will give it to who I choose, whether Mala or a Madiga. Get lost!' to those people who questioned me about renting my house to Satyamurthy.

I lived in the Andhra Mahila Sabha hostel for about five years. I did some work even when there were no classes. Rajamma visited me frequently. Her father lived in Hyderabad and took me to their house during the weekend. His wife treated me with affection. By this time, the party had split in two and the Indo-China war had happened. Several Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) leaders were

jailed. Rajasekhara Reddy took care of their needs. Whenever I went to the MLA[66] quarters in this connection, none of the CPM leaders spoke to me. Savitri consoled me saying, 'Why do you care about these things? You belong to neither the CPI [Communist Party of India, the other branch] nor the CPM. They will change eventually.'

I usually bought something for Karuna with whatever was left with me after meeting my expenses. I was about thirty-three or thirty-four when Sitaramayya left me. A year or two later, I joined the Andhra Mahila Sabha. As I look back now, I wonder how I survived.

FIRST PRIZE

One day, an organisation conducted an essay and story writing competition for all students in Hyderabad. I submitted a story called 'I Get Good Marks in All Examinations but I Failed the Test Called Life'. That story won the first prize. I also wrote a song, 'Is This wrong?' which won the second prize. As I went on to the dais to collect my prizes from Arudra[67] and Tapi Dharmarao, Josyabhatla Subbamma, my long-term friend, jail partner and member of the State Working Committee, rushed towards me and hugged me. 'None of us could do justice to you. But you are building a life for yourself and upholding our party's name even here,' she wept. Sugunamma, who was from the Andhra Mahila Sabha, said proudly, 'She is *our* Koteswaramma.' Subbamma retorted, 'She is not your Koteswaramma. She is actually *our* Koteswaramma. Our incapability to hold her with us makes her your Koteswaramma now.' Then, worried that the Mahila Sabha people might not treat me properly if they knew that I have sympathisers in the party, Subbamma relented, 'All right, she is your Koteswaramma. I was just joking.'

I was good at Telugu and History, but struggled with Mathematics and English. I took help from others here. I also

helped other students in the subjects I knew well. My friends told me that they liked the way I taught Telugu and History, and that my style was better than their teacher's. When I told them that I was going to a radio programme, they said, '*Akka* will definitely buy us something this evening.' I regularly bought something from Annapurna Cafe near Public Gardens. This was around 1960–61.

When I joined the Andhra Mahila Sabha, some people commented that I had left my husband and children. Others sympathised with me, saying that I had sacrificed everything for the party and had come here as an orphan to study. Despite all this, I still had some fighting spirit in me. I thought about my children and about the people's movements regularly. Sometimes, my current life depressed me. To keep myself distracted, I mingled freely with other women in the hostel.

The Andhra Mahila Sabha celebrated 15 August (Independence Day) and 26 January (Republic Day) as festivals. I regularly sang songs during these festivities. This caught the attention of Radio Annayya and Akkayya, and they asked me to do radio programmes. I don't remember the name of my first programme (a radio drama), but the protagonist in it opposes a revolution, while his wife supports it. I played the wife's role. I was complimented for good voice modulation in my role. I attributed it to what life had taught me or due to my drama experience at the Praja Natya Mandali. I earned fifteen rupees and was happy. Akkayya called me and encouraged me to perform more on the radio. I understood then that people outside the party could be good too. There were many more people, like Durgabai Deshmukh, who worked out of patriotism. In one meeting, she said, 'I married at forty, and not just for selfish reasons. My husband supports me in social service too.' I liked the fact that she saw a social benefit aspect even in her own marriage. I was inspired by her life and then wrote a *burrakatha* as a tribute to her from my Praja Natya Mandali experience. One of the two women who usually assist

the main singer in a *burrakatha* wanted to sing the song herself. So I switched roles with her and became part of her chorus for the performance. It was well received. We were later asked to perform this at the exhibition grounds in a government event, perhaps because of Radio Akkayya's recommendation. They paid us well and also printed our photos in their annual diary. I distributed the money I got in this event among the children in our hostel.

In those days, there were eight of us in the hostel. There were some day scholars too, but altogether we were only about fifteen or twenty. The Andhra Mahila Sabha was in Barkatpura and had no permanent buildings. They rented a place near Yuvathi Mandali, close to Neelam Rajasekhara Reddy's house, who took me home during weekends, considering me a family member. I got offers to perform on radio regularly. They often called me if someone did not come on time. I do not remember the names of these programmes now, but they usually lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Some were longer and lasted for about an hour.

Leela invited me if there were any programmes in the MLA quarters. She also encouraged me to perform *burrakatha* or listen to party songs. Thus, I was not too far away from people's movements even during my stay in the Andhra Mahila Sabha.

I went to Vijayawada during the holidays. Karuna came to visit us. I do not know if Chandu visited his father, but he did not visit me. Perhaps his father advised him against it. I longed to see Chandu as frequently as Karuna, and hoped that my children would have a happy future. After some time, I came to know that Chandu had returned to his father as he was unable to study in Madras. I also heard that he had begun to study in Warangal's Regional Engineering College, staying in a hostel because he had some differences of opinion with the woman who lived with Sitaramayya. I was worried that Chandu would now be estranged from his father as well.

A while later, I heard that Satyamurthy, who was working as a teacher in Warangal, had taken Chandu into his home. The wound that I thought was healing started to hurt again. At this time, some of Sitaramayya's relatives bought some land in Adilabad district. Sitaramayya sold his own land, bought some land close to his relatives and shifted his parents there. 'Can Karuna stay in that house with Sitaramayya now without her grandparents and brother?' I wondered, helpless and grief-stricken, unable to take her with me. However, I did send some money to Chandu by pawning my jewellery. Satyamurthy's family supported Chandu a great deal in those days.

KARUNA'S WEDDING

Sitaramayya's farm yield was affected because the project that supplied water to their fields developed problems. They could not benefit from whatever small amount it yielded either. I came to know that he had started to work as a teacher in the Fatima School at Kazipet to run the household. Some young men who had migrated from Krishna and Guntur districts to Warangal for further studies admired Sitaramayya and visited him regularly. They saw his current plight and wondered if Karuna would be able to finish her medical degree under such financial constraints. Kavuri Ramesh Babu, Karuna's classmate, was one of these young men. One day, he approached Sitaramayya and offered to marry Karuna. 'It is better to ask Karuna herself,' Sitaramayya answered. Karuna said, 'You should ask not just my father but also my mother.' A comrade shared this incident happily with me. I was happy, but was also sad and worried at the same time.

I was reminded of my child Karuna who happily went to school in frocks. I thought of the adolescent Karuna who had gone to live with her father in Warangal. Was she already of marriageable age? Wouldn't her studies be affected if she married now and had children? I felt she should get

married after finishing her studies. Elders like Sundarayya and Rajeswara Rao learnt about this proposal. Sundarayya said, 'Karuna is still young. She can get married after finishing her education. It is good if this man waits. If not, we can find somebody else. Many young men among our people are studying medicine these days.' But Rajeswara Rao supported the marriage. 'Ramesh is the nephew of Raavi Durga Rao. He has grown up with someone who respects our party. Don't worry about Karuna's education if she bears children. They are rich. Karuna can live happily even if she is not a doctor. It is important that she leaves this place immediately.' Manikonda Suryavathi told me about these reactions and said: 'Sundarayya is old fashioned. Our party youth are even demanding dowry and gifts during marriage. Ramesh has come by himself and offered to marry Karuna. Let us agree to this proposal.'

Karuna and Ramesh visited Vijayawada during the holidays to inform me of their impending wedding. My mother advised me to accept it without shedding tears. I was reminded of how my wedding was arranged and how it took place in Ventrapragada. I assumed that Karuna's wedding would happen in the presence of her father and other students. My mother and I wished her happiness, wherever she was.

Karuna wrote to me after the wedding date was decided, but Sitaramayya did not inform me. He did not send an invitation either. He perhaps did not want me to come as 'she' would be there. Although several people criticised 'her', I had never said a word against her. Leela and Savitri consoled me, saying that a mother's blessings are the best for a child and suggested that we buy a nice silk sari for her wedding. But they later dropped the idea as I was not invited. Finally, I packed a Kashmir silk sari for Karuna, and a shawl and a scent bottle for Ramesh. I signed a greeting card and sent the packet to them through a friend.

Thus, Karuna married Ramesh in December 1962 in the presence of fellow students in Warangal. Kaloji Narayan Rao,

a well-known progressive poet, presided over their wedding. We heard that they had started living together in a rented house and I was happy for them. Ramesh learnt that I had taken my matriculation exam and was going home from Hyderabad. He received me at Warangal station and took me to their new home. Chandu was there too. I couldn't control my emotions as I got out of the rickshaw, seeing both my children together. It appeared as if I had done the right thing by staying away from them.

A few days later, Karuna and Ramesh visited Challapalli on his uncle Durga Rao's request. During this time, they also visited me and stayed in Vijawayada for four days. My mother was happy and cooked several delicacies for them. 'It would be good if my grandmother can come to Warangal and live with us rather than staying alone here,' Karuna suggested. 'She won't be lonely and I will have some company.' My mother agreed. I thought to myself that if my mother went to Warangal, should I go to Hyderabad to do my teacher training course or should I search for a job? I decided to work, as that would be useful for my children.

LIFE AS A MATRON

I heard about a job opening for women below the age of forty who had passed the matriculation exam to work in the Kakinada girls' polytechnic hostel. Manikonda Suryavathi informed me that the principal of the college was Sundarayya's relative. I applied for the job and got an interview call. In the Andhra Maha Sabha, I was the warden in charge whenever our official warden travelled on duty. With this experience, I was able to handle the interview well and got the job. The fact that I was close to Sundarayya could have worked too.

I rented out our house in Vijayawada, asked the tenants to send the rent to my mother and transferred all the furniture to Karuna's house. Although I was not new to hostel life, I was

new to the job. But I handled my responsibilities with care. Despite the fact that I did not have a degree, both the principal and the warden treated me with respect.

Half of the girls in the hostel belonged to party sympathisers' families (both CPI and CPM). They were like family to me. Their parents were happy to speak with me when they visited the hostel. I learnt that they had admitted their daughters here because of financial difficulties and because they would get scholarships here. They were happy to have me as their children's guardian.

One of the girls, Nirmala (alias Radhakka[68]), was attracted to Naxalite politics while studying here. She married Krishna, a middle-ranking Naxalite leader, who did not demand a dowry. Sitaramayya himself presided over this marriage. They invited me for their meetings regularly, but I only supported them secretly as I was a government employee. I did not speak in their public meetings but never left the party and people's movements. I will continue to support them till my death.

Our Kakinada girls' polytechnic had a good reputation because of the principal, Kamalamma, who worked hard to get scholarships for as many students as possible. The mess charges in our hostel were also relatively low. Because of this, parents preferred to send their daughters here. Along with the usual students from the neighbouring Krishna and Guntur districts, girls started coming from all over the state. A new hostel became a necessity as there was no longer enough space in ours.

A hostel matron is not loved by everyone as the nature of the job is to control them. But I treated all the girls as my own children. So I never had any arguments with them. Since I was younger than the typical matron, the children affectionately called me *akka*. They would tell me not to stay in the hostel for long since Karuna and Chandu would come home. Some of these students visited me much later when I was at the Chandra Rajeswara Rao home for the aged. They felt sad to see me

alone in my old age and invited me to their homes. What was the secret behind the fact that I was good enough for others in this world but not good enough for my own husband?

As I said earlier, the mess bill students paid in our Kakinada polytechnic was less than in most other hostels. I took care of the management of the mess and was fully supported by Kamalamma, who was Sundarayya's niece. Sundarayya once told me that she too had had a difficult life.

Bhattam Srirammurthy was our education minister in those days. He once visited our hostel. It was a surprise visit as he wanted to check how we were able to provide quality food for students at such low cost. He wanted to sit with students and eat, and refused to be treated to an additional curry. After lunch, he came to check our kitchens and noticed that the leftover food was just enough to feed the mess staff. He was happy to see that very little food was wasted here in comparison to engineering and medical college hostels. He asked our students about the food and they all gave positive feedback. I heard later that he asked Kamalamma if they could send me to other engineering and medical hostels as a matron for some time. But Sundarayya warned me against going to other places. He felt that the principal in this hostel knew the party and knew my worth, but the others may not realise it as I did not have a degree. Thus, I refused the offer of a transfer and served in the same hostel for twenty years until I retired.

CLASHES BETWEEN PARTIES

There is only one party according to me—the Communist Party. Even after the split into CPI and CPM, I regularly sent membership fees to both. Later, Sundarayya suggested that I stop this and said that it is better to contribute to society as a party member than send my membership fees regularly. Party members from both CPI and CPM visited me. But I noticed

the instances where my friendliness with one party angered the members of the other. I did not like this attitude and wondered how we could accomplish our goals if we kept splitting the party.

One day, I visited Leela (who now belonged to the CPM) and asked her if she wanted to go see Savitri (who belonged to the CPI) as she was unwell. She agreed and we visited Savitri. But our men privileged politics over human relations and did not want the women to meet each other.

KAKINADA MADE ME A POET

On one of Sundarayya's visits to Kakinada, he introduced me to the local party cadre. They invited me to their Sahitya Lahari meetings regularly. This organisation supported a mixture of classical and modern literary traditions. Progressive writers like Gnanananda Kavi, Janaki Jaani, Ismail, Somasundar, Adrustadeepak, Adavikolanu Parvathi and Chiranjeevini Kumari read their work in these gatherings. These meetings helped me forget my sorrows and develop a taste for literature. I found great solace in listening to new poetry and prose. It also motivated me to write. I regularly wrote to Tapi Rajamma about the meetings. I developed friendships with these writers, along with a taste for good literature. Somasundar encouraged me to participate in poetry gatherings as well. I started to write short poems and recite them there.

People like Somasundar, Chiranjeevini Kumari and Dr Vijayalakshmi organised a conference of the progressive writers from Andhra in Kakinada. Writers from all over the state came to this event. I was reminded of the 1944 writers' conference in Vijayawada. Mahidhara and Parakala Pattabhirama Rao met me here and were happy to see my writings regularly in *Visalandhra*. Their compliments made me happy.

I had never spent quality time with my children in their younger years as I was busy with party activities and other

movements. So I wrote the stories I would have told them as *Amma Cheppina Kathalu* (The Stories That Mother Told) in a lyrical style. A collector called Malakondayya was an active participant and organiser of literary gatherings. I recited one of these stories at a meeting he organised. He liked it and printed a small book compiling five of my writings under the title *Five Stories That Mother Told*. Mokkapati Narasimha Sastri, the author of *Barrister Parvateesam*, liked the book and released it. He also said a few kind words. Thus, Kakinada made me a poet as I started writing about my motherhood.

Both Arasam and Virasam (the Progressive Writers' Association and Revolutionary Writers' Association) existed in Kakinada in those days. The Arasam group was closer to me as I had belonged to it earlier. Some members of these two groups did not even visit the memorial meetings of erstwhile members who had later worked with a different group. However, Mahidhara Rammohan Rao wanted all of us to work together. These literary gatherings were attended by people like Sunkara, Mahidhara, Raghavayya and Viswanatha Satyanarayana's group. I wrote a lot more in those days.

When our hostel got a permanent government post (for a matron), our principal recommended me. So I was able to provide some financial help to my children who were studying then. During my vacations, I visited my mother and Karuna in Warangal.

CHANDU, KARUNA AND I

Whenever I received my salary, I always thought about buying something for my children. One day, Karuna announced that she was pregnant. I experienced a welter of emotions—happiness, fear and sadness. What could a woman pregnant for the first time desire? How will Karuna continue her education during pregnancy? I was reminded of the days of my first pregnancy.

I asked our principal, Kamalamma, to grant me leave to visit Karuna. I was given fifteen days. I went to Warangal and spent my time looking after Karuna and cooking what she wanted. I returned to Kakinada after that, but my heart was in Warangal. I hoped to be there during her delivery and rushed back as soon as I got another holiday.

Karuna continued studying throughout her pregnancy and even wrote an exam on the second day after giving birth to a girl. 'Don't trouble your mother and let her complete her studies with flying colours,' I sang to the baby all through my vacation.

I visited Warangal regularly in that time. Sitaramayya wrote me a note in 1964, after I became a grandmother, seeking a divorce. I read the note with mixed emotions and told Karuna about it during my next visit. She simply listened and did not comment. I wanted to agree to the divorce, but Chandu did not like the idea.

'You are both living separately anyway and you don't seek alimony from him,' Chandu said. 'Why does he want a divorce now? My grandparents still consider you their daughter-in-law. So, for their sake and mine, please remain as Kondapalli Koteswaramma.' Although I had no added advantage because of this arrangement, I decided to comply, respecting their wishes.

Chandu went to visit his grandparents during his vacation. Perhaps he thought of them as his real parents. They supported his education too.

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW MURDERED

Sitaramayya had bought some fields in Jannaram of Adilabad district and left them in the care of some of his party friends as he continued to live in Warangal. But these friends turned against him and wanted to take over the land themselves. They even plotted to kill him. They knew that Sitaramayya was to visit his mother at that time. She prepared his favourite meal,

arranged a cot in the veranda and dozed off waiting for him. Meanwhile, the plotters arrived and killed her thinking it was Sitaramayya on the bed. I wept upon hearing this news. 'How will my father-in-law live without her?' I wondered.

CHANDU'S REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS

A Young Communist unit was started in the Benares Hindu University in 1934. By 1964, we heard that a Naxalbari movement had begun in West Bengal, and young students like Chandu from Warangal's Regional Engineering College were inspired by this. They started working for the Srikakulam struggle. When Tarimela Nagi Reddy[69] visited me during this time, I asked him to ensure that Chandu would not miss out on his studies due to his participation in these activities. He laughed and replied, 'I can talk with Chandu about this, but, if he asks me why I abandoned my own education and joined this movement or why his mother left her studies and joined the freedom struggle, what should I say?' I heard that Chandu had accompanied Satyamurthy to the Guttikonda Bilam meeting organised by Charu Majumdar.[70] Later, Sitaramayya also started to work with this movement.

I visited Warangal during my summer vacations some time after this. Upon learning that Chandu wasn't in his hostel and had gone to Satyamurthy's house, I went there too. I offered him some money to pay for his hostel, but he said, 'I want to quit studies and leave the hostel.' He added, 'I cannot respect Sitaramayya as a father. But I respect him as a Naxalbari revolutionary. You too should learn to respect him as a revolutionary rather than treat him as a husband.'

'I neither respect him nor hate him,' I replied.

I wanted to ask him if he was quitting studies as his grandmother was no longer alive to support him financially. But those who cannot help have no right to ask about such things. So I was quiet.

Meanwhile, Karuna gave birth to a second child and despite that, finished her medical education on time along with her husband. Party colleagues started asking me about their future plans. 'Will the couple work somewhere? Or will they set up their own practice?' Karuna wrote to me after a few months that they were trying for jobs in the Dandakaranya area. When I visited them in Warangal, my older granddaughter Chinni (Anuradha) ran towards me with her arms wide open, saying, 'Grandmother has arrived.' Sitting in my lap, she called all the neighbouring children and introduced me to them, saying that I had brought a lot of sweets for everyone. She asked me to feed her and playfully refused to eat when I did. She told me several stories about her grandfather, whom she liked very much. He carried her often, she said, and would take her to the bazaar and buy her things she liked. During the Sankranti festival, she asked me if I would also pour *bhogipallu*[71] over her like her other grandmother did for Bala, our house owner's child. She told me that she would show me her grandfather during the event.

The day arrived and the *bhogipallu* event was conducted for the two children in Karuna's house. Anuradha waited for her grandfather and kept asking her mother if he had come. She was disappointed when her mother said, 'Perhaps grandfather has gone to his mother's house for Sankranti.' When Bala's grandmother called her husband, *emandi*, Anuradha asked me, 'Isn't grandfather also *emandi* for you?' and we all laughed. When my vacation ended and I was to leave, Anuradha sat in the rickshaw wanting to come with me. I had to tell her a story to distract her and leave. Some time later, Karuna and Ramesh left for Dandakaranya.

My mother was happy for them and both of us returned to Vijayawada. She wanted to continue living there and I returned to work in Kakinada. In a relaxed frame of mind, I was attracted to literary activities again. I participated in the fund-raising programme to celebrate Sri Sri's[72] sixtieth birth

anniversary. I wrote and recited a poem in an event organised by Tenneti Viswanatham, with Somasundar's encouragement. I was content with my life.

ANOTHER TWIST

As time passed, our principal, Kamalamma, was transferred to Hyderabad and a replacement arrived. She was bossy and did not treat her subordinates well. We also heard rumours that she was corrupt. She also imposed restrictions on my movements. Either because of my participation in revolutionary movements or because I did not bribe her, my increments stopped. I was told that I might not even receive a pension after retirement. My interest in literary activities dropped again.

After staying in Bastar for a year and half, Karuna and Ramesh left for Delhi on a new job. I heard that Chandu had been arrested for his active involvement in revolutionary movements. My mother wrote to me asking me to come to Vijayawada. I wondered if our new principal would grant me leave and lamented that all my happiness was already fading away. Perhaps fate took pity on me and the vacations arrived.

My legs trembled when I boarded the train to Hyderabad to visit Chandu, who was in jail there. But I gathered my courage, visited the CPI party office and went to the jail along with a party colleague. We got permission to speak to Chandu for ten minutes in the presence of a superintendent. Chandu's eyes seemed to question me, 'Why are you so worried about me? Did you not live in jails too?' He smiled as he spoke to me, without showing any signs of anxiety. I thought he had his father's bravery in him. When I gave some of the fruit that I had brought for him to the superintendent too, Chandu said, 'Are you bribing him?' and laughed. All of us laughed at this remark. I asked him to visit us in Vijayawada if he got bail.

One year later, the government incriminated him in the Parvathipuram conspiracy case[73] and released him on bail.

My mother wrote to say that he stayed with her in Vijayawada and went to the police station every day to sign in. Perhaps this was why my mother ended up in Vijayawada instead of going to Delhi with Karuna, I thought. Since Chandu lived without family and without people whom he could call his own for years, I was happy that he was now living with my mother. I sent my salary home every month. Whenever I visited them, I looked at Chandu and thought that he should get married. When I raised the subject, he always replied, 'Of what use is marriage, mother? The government will either arrest or kill me. You will have an additional burden of a daughter-in-law, as if what you go through now is not enough.'

He lived with us for a year, raising our garden, painting pictures, singing and calling this home his. We were so happy during this time. This was our happiest year with Chandu.

MY CHANDU NEVER RETURNED

One day in May 1972, the police took Chandu to Parvathipuram for a court hearing. Usually, he would return within two days after these hearings. This time, four days went by and he did not come back. My mother enquired about him at the police station. They told her that they already sent him back and had no clue of his whereabouts. We thought he had gone underground again. After a few days, a few policemen from Karnataka approached my mother. They showed her a few clothes and slippers, and asked her if these belonged to Chandu. They then informed her that Chandu had consumed poison and died. My mother knew these weren't Chandu's belongings and told the police so, adding, 'You have hidden him somewhere and are misleading us into believing that he is dead.'

Then they came to me. Our principal refused to let me speak with them, saying that this was against the law. But our warden convinced her to let me do so, explaining my worries

as a mother. As Chandu did not live with me, I could not identify these clothes and shoes as his. I could not control my tears when I heard that he was no more. They left the place after making me sign a few papers. They neither showed me my son's corpse nor even a photo as a proof of his death. They just erased his image from this world forever.

I had no means to express my anguish in the hostel. I silently cried covering the tears with my sari. At this moment, a students' strike began in Kakinada and the government closed our hostel temporarily. So, I went to Vijayawada to stay with my mother. I wanted to relieve myself of my sadness by hugging my mother. As I entered the house, she asked me if I knew the news about Chandu. I broke down. She said, 'Why do you cry? Did they tell you he died? Those clothes and shoes are not his. He is alive. Don't believe in these police stories.'

I went to the *Visalandhra* office and met Maddukuri Chandram[74] there. He said that he had read about Chandu in the newspapers. 'Chandu may have committed suicide or perhaps the police killed him while trying to find his father's whereabouts. In either case, it's very likely that he is no more. But it is better for your mother that she does not believe the police. She had raised Chandu herself. She may not be able to handle the news of his death at this age. It is best you bear your pain yourself and not share it with her.' I listened to his advice and bore my pain alone.

Peddabbai (Raghava Rao), who had never visited me after I had split up with Sitaramayya, came to see me at this time. His arrival brought back old memories. I wanted to ask him why he had come and why he had not thought about me all these years. I did not want to really talk to him. But I was also reminded of the old *peddabbai* who took care of me when Sitaramayya was living incognito and the one who entertained Chandu when he was a child. So, though I could not talk to him, I did not tell him to go away. He understood my predicament and initiated the conversation himself.

He suggested that we go to Hyderabad to find out Chandu's whereabouts. He introduced me to Kannabiran[75] the next day.

Kannabiran asked me to write down all the events that had happened with the police about Chandu. Tears blurred my vision and I couldn't write properly. Eventually, *peddabbai* wrote a report and I signed it. I think it was sent to the Tarkunde Committee.[76] I am not sure. I waited for the comments from this committee.

One day, we heard the news that Rajan, an engineering student from Calicut, had been killed by the police. They accused him of having ties with Naxalites. They tortured him to death and announced that he had committed suicide. Rajan's father insisted on an enquiry into the matter and fought hard for justice. Eventually, it was established that the police had killed him.[77] Our newspapers dubbed Chandu as the 'Andhra Rajan'. Chandram showed me the news item which said, 'Kondapalli Chandrasekhar was killed by the police' and advised me to read it without showing it to my mother. The source of this news were the findings of the Tarkunde Committee.

We also heard about Sitaramayya's capture before we knew about this announcement. *Peddabbai* was worried that Sitaramayya too would be killed by the police in a fake encounter. So, he sent me a telegram suggesting that I appeal to the prime minister and the chief minister. Sitaramayya's nephew, Narayana Reddy, then said that I had done the right thing by not officially separating from him as we could now appeal for him.

We also heard from relatives that Sitaramayya's father was living with his nephew, Raja Reddy. I asked them who was looking after the lands now. All the lands they were left with were those that could not be appropriated by others. The relatives replied that they had suggested to Sitaramayya that he give the lands to me and he had said, 'Everyone is dead. Koteswaramma will not be interested in property now. I will use them for public benefit.' I learnt that he had sold the lands

and donated the money to the party's magazine, *Pilupu*, and to the activities of the party's cultural wing, the Jana Natya Mandali.

I felt sad looking back on the lives of my in-laws. I recalled that Sitaramayya had donated his share of the family property too to the Communist Party in the early days of my marriage. 'He may not be rich now, but he has always been so in his generosity,' I told myself. Anyway, how does that concern me? Why should I care so much about him? Why should these relatives care to update me about him? Perhaps this is how the world works.

I read in the papers that Sitaramayya was leading a new armed struggle and heard about the deaths of his party members in encounters. The government started announcing fat rewards for people who informed the police of the whereabouts of these leaders living underground. News like this reached my mother too, just as it reached me through friends and relatives. When I went to visit her during one of my vacations, she commented, 'Our Chandu himself went into the armed struggle. What can we say about Sitaramayya?'

A TELUGU STAR IN NEW DELHI

When Ramesh and Karuna had finished their medical studies, I thought that they would set up a practice in either Vijayawada or Challapalli. But, as I mentioned earlier, their first job in 1968 was in the Dandakaranya project hospital at Kondagaav near Raipur. They did not stay there long and moved to Delhi, getting jobs as government doctors.

Apart from being a responsible doctor, Ramesh was an active member of society. He was involved in several activities related to Telugu arts, literature and culture. His connection with various progressive movements and Karuna's company too would have helped him in this. His uncle, Durga Rao, was

a film producer who had made the Telugu movie *Palletooru* (Village). Karuna had been interested in the Praja Natya Mandali since her childhood. Thus, both Ramesh and Karuna had a keen interest in culture. Their house in Delhi became a hub of activity. Lajpat Bhavan, which was close to where they lived, had a huge library. Chekuri Rama Rao[78] used to say that Ramesh had taken the initiative to start a Telugu section and even compiled the initial collection of books there. Ramesh also played a major role in starting the cultural activities of south Delhi's Andhra Society. The great poet Kalidasa had said, *Kavyeshu natakam ramyam* (Drama is the most beautiful of poetical compositions). Ramesh also wanted to perform a thought-provoking Telugu play in Delhi. What better drama than *Kanyasulkam* (bride price)? He organised a team from the Delhi Telugu Society and they performed it several times. Karuna played the role of Meenakshi and Ramesh played Lubdavadhanlu. It was well received by the audience. I was reminded of our *Kanyasulkam* performance in Vijayawada in 1944. I was happy to see that like our house in those days, Karuna's house now had become a home for the arts.

With the help of elders like Burra Venkatappayya and Vasireddi Ramadevi, Ramesh played a role in the establishment of the Andhra Educational Society. One of the aims of the society was to teach Telugu to Andhra children in Delhi. They also taught music and *kuchipudi* dance. Karuna's older daughter started learning music and the younger one dance.

After releasing a souvenir on the poet Gurajada, Ramesh wanted to release a similar one on Gidugu Ramamurthy and started collecting material for the book. During this process, he became friends with Abburi Ramakrishna Rao's[79] family, who lived in Delhi in those days. However, Ramesh suddenly got a job offer as a doctor in Yemen. He decided to go there in view of the family's needs. It was planned that he would move first, and Karuna and the children would follow later.

RAMESH GOES TO THE LAND OF NO RETURN

Ramesh wanted to meet his family and well-wishers back at home in Andhra before leaving for Yemen. Since the children also had summer vacations at that time, all of them went on a holiday tour. First, they visited Ajanta and Ellora caves. After spending a few days with Karuna and the children, Ramesh went to Hyderabad to collect material for his planned book on Gidugu Ramamurthy. He then returned to Vijayawada and continued his search for additional material despite the scorching heat. One day, he roamed outside in the hot sun and reached home very late in the evening. He was down with fever the next day. Karuna, being a doctor herself, gave him medication and took care of him. By evening, he started to vomit.

Rammohan Rao, who was with us then, realised that the situation was serious and took Ramesh to the hospital. Before Karuna and I realised what was going on, Ramesh passed away that night, taking a promise from Rammohan Rao that he would take care of Karuna and her children.

Karuna fainted when she heard the news. My mother couldn't handle Karuna's plight. She began pleading with everyone to take care of her.

I was in Kakinada when this happened. Our new principal came to me and said, 'We have news that your mother has fainted. Please go to Vijayawada immediately.' They thought that I would not be able to handle the actual news. So, I rushed to Vijayawada and what did I see? My daughter's life was ruined. I did not understand if I should cry myself or comfort her first. My son-in-law was lying dead. My daughter was crying inconsolably. Her young children were looking on innocently. It felt so unreal. I felt as if I was struck by lightning.

I looked around after recovering from the initial shock. Our friends were weeping and watching Karuna with concern. Rammohan was consoling Karuna and the children. He told

me that my heart should be strong like a rock. He reminded me that I should think about Karuna's future and the children's. He assured me that he would be there for any assistance. He asked the children to address him 'Ram *thathayya*' (Grandpa Ram). The Delhi Telugu Society also expressed grief when they learnt that their friend who wanted to go to the fabled land of Arabia had gone to the land of no return instead. Some of them sent letters urging Karuna to get back to life and start working as a doctor and a social worker.

We learnt that they had named one of the Andhra Educational Society schools Ramesh Babu Memorial School in his memory. My grandchildren visited that school recently. There were tears in my eyes when I learnt that the school was still flourishing in an area called Saket. Were they tears of happiness or sadness? I said that Ramesh was lucky. My friends said that Karuna was also lucky.

KARUNA'S PLIGHT

I applied for leave and left for Delhi with Karuna so that I could comfort her. Our friends in Delhi received us affectionately and took good care of her. Although the officials and other hospital staff were kind to her, Karuna could not continue there with Ramesh's memories. During this time, she got a job offer from Yemen from the same group that had invited Ramesh. I felt that it was not a good idea to go so far in her current state of mind, but other friends suggested that it would perhaps help her recover quickly.

Raghava Rao and Rammohan assured Karuna that they would take care of her children, and they did. Rammohan and Jhansi became father and mother to my granddaughters. I wanted to resign from my job to take care of the children too, but Raghava Rao reminded me that I needed a job and a pension in my old age. He also assured me that he, Rammohan

and my mother could take care of the children in my absence. So I went back to work at Kakinada.

Karuna left for Yemen in January 1980. We wrote to each other regularly. She loved gardening. One day, she sent me a letter describing her garden, along with some photographs. She looked very thin and weak in the photographs. She had gone there to ensure that her children had a good future. However, seeing her photograph, I felt that the company of loving children was as important as the money that would give them a good future. I could see that she was worried about her children. Thoughts of her childhood overcame me and I felt sad. I wanted her to return for her own good. It happened as I expected. She went to Yemen to stay for five years, but returned in September 1981, the very next year. Her children also went there and spent a few months during this time.

KARUNA IN VIJAYAWADA

Our relatives were saddened at the sight of a frail Karuna. She cancelled her five-year leave and applied for a government hospital posting in Vijayawada. They appointed her in the postal department's hospital. Rammohan was relieved that she would now be closer to her children. He took her to a psychiatrist, Ramasubba Reddy, who diagnosed Karuna with depression and suggested some medication. He also advised us to distract her mind with literary activities.

As Karuna continued with her personal and professional commitments, her father's party members gradually became regular visitors to her house. She also helped them organise various cultural activities on the party's behalf. Despite all these, she did well in her profession and earned a good name. She started writing short stories on social issues and about the troubles of her patients. A collection of these stories was later published under the name *Tarjani*. She was kind and sometimes offered poor patients money to buy medicines.

Thus, she earned fame as a good doctor in and around the Vijayawada region.

During this time, the home minister of Andhra Pradesh, Dr Kodela Sivaprasada Rao, commented, 'Communist leaders make their own children doctors and engineers and send them abroad. But they ask others to jump into revolutionary movements.' Karuna reacted strongly to this statement and sent letters to several newspapers.

She wrote, 'I worked hard and earned my marks, without needing any tuitions. I studied without paying a donation. My husband, Ramesh, supported me as I did not have money to pay my fees. My brother did not go abroad either. Your government killed him secretly when he was a student at REC. Please verify your facts before giving such statements.' This figured prominently in all major newspapers. I was happy at her forthrightness.

But despite all this, she could not forget Ramesh. She began using sleeping pills every night and tried to commit suicide more than once. My mother and the children tried to ensure that she did not take such extreme steps.

N.T. Rama Rao became chief minister in 1981 and ordered that the retirement age be advanced to fifty-five years. I now had to leave Kakinada. For twenty years, Kakinada had given me shelter. It had provided me both a livelihood and a life beyond work, and thus helped me forget my sorrows. I left my 'mother' Kakinada and came to live with my human mother. I felt her become the support system for both Karuna and me.

Karuna, her two daughters, my mother and I—four generations of women—began living together. During this time, Karuna became friends with some of Sitaramayya's admirers and members of Virasam, the Revolutionary Writers' Association. They were good to Karuna and her children, but had a low opinion of me and my mother. Although their words hurt us at times, we never expressed ourselves openly.

We were happy for Karuna as they treated her with sisterly affection. Such problems were not new to us so, my mother and I consoled each other.

LIKE A CASTOR PLANT IN A GARDEN

Around this time, a school called Vikasa Vidyavanam was established in Vijayawada under the leadership of Anne Radhakrishna Murthy. They wanted to build a hostel for the school and Tummala Venugopala Rao suggested to Karuna that I join them to take care of it. They were kind intellectuals who established the school with some ideals. I was glad to know that they wanted me to join them, but did not take a decision. 'You will go to the hospital and the children to their school,' I said to Karuna. 'Your father's friends will visit this house regularly. Who will take care of the house and cooking if I start working in the hostel?'

'Aren't all our visitors like our family? The cook can take care of the maintenance of the house. The hostel is anyway close by. So, you need not stay there. You can come home after work every day. Since we don't have any financial troubles, I suggest that you work in the hostel on an honorary basis,' Karuna replied.

It appeared as if she wanted me to join the hostel. I was reminded of the proverb, 'The medicinal tree from one's own garden is not useful for one's own family.'[80] Perhaps I was not of much use to my parents and my present family, but if I could be of use to future citizens, what more could I ask for? Therefore, I agreed to join the hostel as a volunteer so that I could drown my sorrows in work.

Once I started working there, I came home every day to meet my mother and Karuna. I regularly plucked some fruit and leaves from the trees Chandu had planted in our garden to use while preparing food for the hostel children. Karuna felt that I liked the children there. I was happy when the children

in the hostel gathered around me to take the guavas I brought for them and asked me to tell them stories. Their presence brightened my life and I wanted to write poetry again.

It looked as if Vikasa Vidyavanam was coaxing me silently to start writing again, just as Kakinada did. Karuna was with me now. I should at least see Chandu through my writings. So, I wrote a few poems sitting in the garden he had planted. While I felt that I might appear a fool in this world of inhuman politics and literature, I made words my friends.

Thus, I started to live a life engaged in literature and social activity. I supported group activities for the common good, irrespective of political boundaries. I spoke about my past experiences on stage whenever women activists invited me to their meetings. I kept myself engaged by participating in such events apart from my regular job at the hostel. Venugopala Rao encouraged me in this period.

One evening, I went home to visit Karuna and my mother. As usual, I plucked a few guavas and curry leaves to take to the hostel, and stepped inside briefly before leaving. I heard two voices. One of them asked, 'I left my wrist watch on the table before going for a bath. It is missing now. Did someone come in?' The other replied, 'Karuna's mother came in. Perhaps she took it?' I was shocked beyond words when I heard this. Insulted, I felt no desire to stay there any longer. Although I did not know if Karuna was at home, I returned straight to the hostel.

I was reminded of the incident when our party members insulted Dr Acchamamba in 1948. I felt that internal struggles within the party were changing the value system among its members.

BACK HOME

In time, Vikasa Vidyavanam acquired its own building in Gunadala. They requested me to move to the new building

with them. I refused as it was far away from our house. I had worked there for four years. Venugopala Rao mentioned that they wanted to gift me a Buddha statue and ten thousand rupees in cash as a token of gratitude for my service to them. Since I had gone there voluntarily, Karuna suggested that I do not take monetary gifts in return.

'Won't they be offended if I refuse to take their gift?' I thought. 'And won't Karuna be offended if I accept the offer?' After thinking about it for a while, I decided to accept the Buddha statue and reject the cash award. I suggested that they use it to start a prize for students in the school in Chandu's name. The award would be given annually to a student who showed skill in music and arts. The school administration gladly agreed. I felt that this was a good way to remember Chandu at least once a year. This was my last job. After that, I stayed at home.

One day, we learnt that the poet Sri Sri had passed away. The members of Virasam met in our house to prepare red flags for his funeral procession. I remembered that Arasam members had once practised Sri Sri's song *Polalananni halaladunni* (Ploughing the fields deeply) in our house years ago. Our house, which had once hosted progressive writers and Praja Natya Mandali members who admired Sri Sri, was now hosting these people who were carrying flags for his funeral. This gave me a feeling of satisfaction.

My mother's constant worry about Karuna started to affect her health. Whenever I asked her to eat, she would say: 'I don't want to. Let me die before Karuna. I am tired of watching your miseries all my life. I have no energy to witness any more.' I responded, saying, 'If you go away as well, who will wipe my tears?' To which she replied, 'You seem to live only to cry all your life.'

One day, she called me to her bed and said, 'I am going to die soon. It is not possible for your brother to come from America to perform my last rites. Rammohan Rao was with

me since his childhood and has always called me *amma*. Let him perform my last rites. I don't want religious rituals. Remember me in a memorial meeting in the tradition of your party. Inform people from both parties that Anjamma wanted them to work together. I have saved two thousand rupees and given it to Vemuri Nageswara Rao. Take it from him and divide it equally between the two parties.'

She died within a week of having said these words. Karuna honoured my mother's last wish. Leaders like Katragadda Srinivasa Rao attended the memorial meeting. Seniors like Parakala Pattabhirama Rao spoke about the services of my mother to the party during the days of underground life. He also remembered her contribution to the party's development. He compared my mother to Gorky's *Mother*. 'When the Malabar police killed whoever they found mercilessly, Anjamma fearlessly protected us and fed us like our mother,' he reminisced. He concluded by urging everyone to carry her story to the future generations.

A welter of emotions engulfed me when all these leaders compared my mother who had stood by me and protected me all my life, to Gorky's 'Mother'. She had been with me since my marriage and was almost never with my brother. My brother, Venkata Reddy, had also worked in the student movement as a young man. Later, he was a courier for various leaders while he continued working in the railway department. He was once captured by the police and served a prison sentence for six months. He lost his hearing because of police torture. His wife became mentally ill for a while because of this. After this incident, they stayed away from politics and from us, although he did get his job back because of the workers' union. He went to the US after his retirement to live with his daughter there. My sister-in-law was afraid of our political affiliations and maintained a distance from us throughout. My brother was a soft-spoken man but was afraid of making his wife angry. Eventually, he could not visit us even when my mother died.

My niece, Jyothi, sent some money from the US for the religious rites after my mother's death. My mother was a supporter of women's education. She had once suggested that we both stay away from Karuna so that she could finish her studies in medicine. I gave that money to establish an annual scholarship for girls who did well in academics at Pamarru in my mother's name.

KARUNA LEAVES US

Karuna never recovered. She had lost her husband and her brother. Her father's safety was in question too. She could not handle the uncertainty and could not sustain a desire to live, even with her young daughters. So, one day, she left us. When none of us was at home, she locked herself in the house and consumed an overdose of sleeping pills. We assumed that she had gone to the hospital as the house was locked. But we realized she was not in the hospital when the nurses called to enquire about her. When we opened the window of her room from outside, we saw her lying on the bed. We immediately broke the door down and took her to a hospital.

'We could have saved her if you had brought her an hour before. Now, she is about to die,' the doctor said. She breathed her last on my lap. Before I recovered from the grief of my mother's death, I had lost my daughter as well.

In her last letter, she had written, 'I am doing an injustice to you and my children. My brother has also left us. You have lived for us and we both cheated you. I cannot live any longer, mother. I am going to meet Ramesh. Please forgive me.' I could not finish reading it. When I began weeping after reading two lines, others took the letter away from me.

I cannot explain my plight at that time. I don't remember what was going through my mind when Karuna was lying on my lap on that day. Rammohan Rao counselled courage and felt that there would be legal problems if police found out that

it was a suicide. Since Karuna's elder daughter, Anuradha, was not at home, we sent her a message.

My mother, who had performed my marriage, was dead now. The children born of that marriage were dead. It feels as if that marriage was a dream. I was reminded of Dasarathi's poem:

> How much fire hides beneath this cool sea breeze?
> How many suns hide behind this dark sky?

'Is my life a dream? Or is it just a stream of tears? Can I really survive with this heart that burns?' I wondered.

That evening, Tummala Krishnabai arrived with Anuradha. As all of us wept for her, the party members and others shouted, '*Johar* Karuna', '*Amar hai* Karuna'. Thus ended her funeral.

Neelam Rajasekhara Reddy, who I treated as my brother, visited me during this time. I could not control my tears. I couldn't speak to him. He held my hands in his and said, 'Why are you crying? Karuna did not die. If Karuna [kindness] dies, there is no humanity. She won't die. She is in your eyes. She is in my eyes too. That is why I am here with you now. She is in everybody's eyes. You have to live, seeing Karuna in everyone.'

Satyamurthy (Sivasagar) too came to visit me. 'I came to wipe your tears with mine,' he said. '

'Satyam, you cannot wipe my tears. How many people have been crying like this for generations now?' I replied.

Although he belonged to Sitaramayya's party, he was always affectionate to me. I penned my thoughts in a poem, *Asru Samikshanam* (A Pool of Tears). Later, a collection of my poetry was released in a book bearing the same name.

After Sitaramayya left me, there had been days when I had wanted to kill myself. One day, wanting to jump in, I had approached the well in our house. Karuna had seen me at that moment and asked what I was doing there. I went away without responding. Another time, I had also tried to commit

suicide using Karuna's sleeping pills, which she had begun to use after Ramesh's death. But she realised my intentions and kept them out of my reach. She had taken care of me, but hadn't been able to take care of herself. She had been flourishing in her career and earning the goodwill of people. She had also earned a name with her short stories. I had hoped that this would continue. Instead, she had made her already fatherless children motherless too and left this world.

After Karuna's death, visits to our house from party members reduced. But I kept hearing news about Sitaramayya, whether I liked it or not. I heard that he had gone to China to meet the Communist Party there and that he had plans of expanding his party network. I also heard that he was quarrelling with party members and had started to become unreasonable. The party members perhaps felt that he was old and senile. One visitor informed us that Sitaramayya was gradually being ignored in the party.

SITARAMAYYA'S ILLNESS, ARREST AND LAST DAYS

I came to know that Sitaramayya had left the People's War Group and founded a new political party along with his group of followers. There could have been several reasons for this. Perhaps he was disappointed that his ideals had been transformed completely when they were implemented. He may have been hurt that he was sidelined by the party members he had trusted and helped. Whatever the reasons, he started a new party and visited Gudiwada once in the process of expanding its activities. During this visit, he fell ill and took shelter in a place where the police arrested him.

This appeared in the newspapers. I heard my granddaughters speaking about it. I did not want to know any more.

At this time, my cousin, Veera Reddy, visited me and said, 'Sitaramayya wants to see you. I can take you to him. Will you come?'

'Is it enough that he wants a meeting? Shouldn't I too want to meet him? Since I don't, I won't come,' I replied.

Friends who visited him told me that Sitaramayya had become old and weak, and was suffering from physical and mental illnesses. Although he was still a revolutionary, he was now a frail old man who was separated from his fellow-revolutionaries. Perhaps the NTR government saw him as harmless. I soon read the news that he had been released from prison.

I heard that he had moved in with his nephew, Narayana Reddy. My granddaughters went to visit him at Hyderabad. Two days later, Sudha and her husband Gangadhar returned to Vijayawada along with Sitaramayya.

I had neither love nor hatred for Sitaramayya by then. Earlier, I had felt he had been cruel towards me. Later, I realised that he hadn't been happy either. His politics was his and I had mine. I moved on, doing what I could. When I had once commented, 'What will I achieve staying alive?' Sundarayya had responded, 'Whether you serve the nation or not, you won't harm it. Such people too are needed now.'

Prior to his capture, Sitaramayya had lived in exile for some time. He had called for me a couple of times during this phase, but I had not responded. I did not feel the need to visit him now when my children from that marriage were no more. I heard later that he had wept. Perhaps he repented. I don't know. Several friends asked me to meet him while he was in jail and after he was released. I refused. I had never met him in all these years. The first time I saw him since the day he left our house was when Sudha and Gangadhar brought him back.

All our old and new friends started visiting our house to meet Sitaramayya. Katragadda Narayana Rao, Mahidhara Rammohan Rao and Kaloji Narayana Rao visited me one day after meeting him. 'Sitaramayya repents the past now. You should meet him,' they suggested.

'I don't want to see him,' I replied. 'If I surrender to tradition and express a desire to meet Sitaramayya like a loyal Indian wife, as communists you should convince me against it by saying that this would be an injustice to all oppressed women. How can you all ask me to forget everything and patch up?'

'Please don't say that. He did not live happily either. If he were a cruel person, we would not have visited him now. Forget his weaknesses and look at the revolutionary in him and his dedication to his ideology. Respect him for that. If you can see him with a mother's heart, both of you can find some solace. He is repenting and wants to meet you. Visit him as a friend.' Thus, these three men who I respect as my brothers convinced me and took me to Sitaramayya. He cried as soon as he saw me.

'Why do you cry now? My eyes have become dry after years of crying for you, your children, your support, my food and shelter. Your eyes still can shed tears.' I said. That made him cry even more.

Sitaramayya looked more like his father now than himself. Tears rolled down my cheeks too when I saw him cry. His friends took him out with them to console him. Thus, I saw Sitaramayya during the day, amidst our friends, thirty-six years after he left us that midnight. Life is strange!

Sudha and Gangadhar took care of him. They lived on the first floor. He used to call for me if I did not visit them for a few days, and I would go and meet him. I continued to live in that house for another year and half after he arrived. If I cooked something that he liked, I sent it upstairs. He wanted to live with me, but I dismissed the idea whenever someone broached the topic. It was one thing to accept him as a friend. Living with him was another.

Cooking the food he liked was different. Since I knew what he liked, I used to send it to him just as I would have done for Chandu or Karuna. I did not do anything more for

him. If Chukku (Sudha) went out somewhere, I cooked for Sitaramayya if he sent me a message asking me to. Although his party members visited him frequently, it was Chukku who really took care of him.

Tears automatically rolled down my face whenever I saw him. I pitied him for his state of mind and compared it to his illustrious past. Eventually, I left Vijayawada to escape this grief.

'Sitaramayya's party rejected and sidelined him just as he rejected me, didn't they?' I told myself, 'Perhaps, some lives are destined to be like this.' I felt sad...whenever I thought about these things. I was reminded of my mother, who had stood by me in all my troubles and given me courage.

Sometimes, Sitaramayya would say, 'Let us go back to Pamarru.' However, he would not respond when I asked, 'Who is there in Pamarru now?' If I said, 'Your mother is no more,' he would cry and point to his own photograph saying, 'Here is my father.' Whenever he cried saying, 'You did not visit us when my parents passed away,' his words hurt me and reminded me of the past though I knew he was mentally unstable.

He had lost everything. If that was not enough, he had lost his mind too. This thought saddened me. Misery appeared to be my full-time, lifelong companion. I decided to move to an old-age home, wondering if this would change anything. And yet, I felt a sort of detachment towards everybody.

OLD-AGE HOME

Dasari Nagabhushana Rao and a few others had started a home in Hyderabad for the welfare of ageing freedom fighters and revolutionaries. He invited me to its inauguration, which took place on 2 October 1999. Mahidhara Rammohan Rao and I went to the function from Vijayawada. I liked the environment and decided to live there. I thought that it would be better to live in this atmosphere than stay in Vijayawada,

which constantly reminded me of my past. Mahidhara and Dasari too agreed with me. Thus, I moved to Hyderabad.

Everything went on well as long as Mahidhara lived there too. I had good company and we spent our time discussing politics and literature. Things changed after he died. I could have lived there without speaking to anyone, reading and writing by myself and donating my monthly pension to the home to cover its maintenance.

I lived there not because it was run by our party members, but to lead a peaceful life in my last days. My grandchildren had never liked the idea and always wanted me to come back, but I did not want to be a burden to them. What had I done for them really? Thus, I continued living in the old-age home as long as I could look after myself.

Since I had worked as a caretaker in a hostel for twenty-five to thirty years, I felt like one even in the home. In the past, I had taken care of children. Here, they were older people. I did things like reading out the news for those who couldn't see clearly, serving coffee to those who couldn't walk to the dining hall, and helping with the gardening. Whenever I felt lonely or tearful, I would read a good book. This home had a good library. It became my companion. I also donated a lot of books.

Sometimes I feel that perspectives on caste and women have changed with time. Once upon a time, Dalits couldn't have raised their voices against oppression. Now, they are able to. However, I feel that women of this age have more troubles than we did. Look at the state of working women—some of them do not find any free time at all. They work throughout the day, inside and outside the house, and no one sympathises with them. They have to work at home after coming back from office. While the husbands relax, wives have to serve them tea and cook them what they want. What happiness do these women have? Some of them may be happy, but most are not.

SITARAMAYYA'S FUNERAL

No one informed me of Sitaramayya's death in our old-age home, although it was broadcast on television. Perhaps they did not want to make me unhappy. Sitaramayya's nephew, Narayana Reddy, came to the home and I was shocked to hear the news.

I went to Vijayawada. My granddaughter, Sudha, was crying, sitting next to Sitaramayya's body. Memories from the past were all around me. I was reminded of Anuradha's joy as she sat on her grandfather's shoulders and watched the streets of Warangal from above and her discovery that I addressed Sitaramayya as *emandi*. Eventually, he was not my *emandi* anymore. He was nothing to anyone. He left the family to serve his party, and when he became old, tired and mentally unstable, his party, which should have looked after him, abandoned him. I wondered if my grandchildren felt sad for him or thought that he had failed as a family man. These thoughts made me both sad and angry. 'You left the family, refused to take responsibility for them and dedicated all your life to people and movements. But who took care of you after all? Who was there when you became mentally ill? It was your family. It was your granddaughter, Sudha!' I shouted out in my anger. So many thoughts jostled for space in my mind when I saw Sitaramayya's body. He had spent so many years of his life for the movement, for people. In the eighty years of his life, he had spent sixty as a revolutionary. When he was not in prison or had not lived in exile, he had perhaps led a normal life for about twenty years. Why then did none of his party colleagues come to see him? Should they have abandoned him because he differed from them? Long ago, Sitaramayya had abandoned me, saying that I did not suit him. Now, his party comrades had abandoned him. Is this what life is about?

Why couldn't those who had benefited from him and his colleagues attend his funeral? There was some unfathomed

anger within me along with several old memories. I was reminded of the time in the early days of our marriage when he participated in road processions carrying the flag. I am not concerned here with Sitaramayya's personal life after he left me. But he had donated everything to the movement, introduced me to it, and worked day and night so that the red flag would fly high. What happened to his party, which envisioned a day when farmers and workers would progress together hand in hand? That Communist Party had now split into seven. Which amongst these seven will establish that equal society we had hoped for? Each May Day, we raise slogans saying, 'Workers of the world, unite!' But we never unite ourselves. We fight among ourselves. How, then, can the workers unite? Who will bring the revolution? Anguished, I offered a red salute to Sitaramayya, the first to introduce me to revolution. A few of his communist friends and supporters came to bid him farewell, with red flags and garlands.

My relatives made me garland the now-silent Sitaramayya. I wiped my eyes and looked at him. I could still hear his deep voice singing out aloud. Amidst the slogans raised by his fans and followers, I could hear that May Day song he had sung in 1940:

Let our red flag fly high
freely without obstacles.
Let imperialism perish
let capitalism be burnt down.
Rise now, farmers
rise now, workers
Let us walk together.
Salutations to the red flag!

I was also reminded of Dasarathi Krishnamacharya's song:

How far away is the new age
where there is no hunger, no poverty?

When will the time come
when there is no drought?
How much blood should be shed
for the happiness of humankind?
How many unwritten classics will there be
in the heart of wounded poets?

I was old but my revolutionary spirit was not dead yet. I felt it was better to remain in the old-age home named after a revolutionary leader. So, I returned to the Chandra Rajeswara Rao Old Age Home in Hyderabad. I spent my time reading books, writing short pieces of literature and attending events organised by people I respected. I lived in the home till 2009, without giving in to the depression in my soul.

I visited my elder granddaughter, Anuradha, who lived in Visakhapatnam in 2009. I felt an urge to see Gurajada's Vijayanagaram once again. I attended an event commemorating ChaSo's death there. Later, I went to Srikakulam to visit KaRa Mastaru's[81] Katha Nilayam along with Anuradha, Sudha and Krishna (Anuradha's husband). I also visited the Telineelapuram bird sanctuary, Boddapadu village, which was home to many martyrs, and Mandasa fort during this trip.

Katha Nilayam reminded me of the Telugu proverb, *Katha kanchiki, manam intiki* (All the stories go to Kanchi, we go to our home).[82] These stories proved the proverb wrong. It appeared as if they told me, 'We will not go to Kanchi. Neither do we have regional biases nor do we hide the beauty of our regional dialects.' These collections of short stories hosted in that two-storeyed building sat humbly there; they were neither proud of their famous writers nor ashamed of their unknown ones. These books evoked so many thoughts in visitors.

Telineelapuram's birds welcomed us with their colourful feathers and varied beauty. They reminded me of the rainbow and autumn flowers. Their calls reminded me that nature is for everyone to cherish. It appeared as if all those pigeons that

handed letters to lovers, peacocks that taught dance, black cuckoos that sang sweet songs, swans with a beautiful gait and several other birds from different countries had come here as they could not confine themselves to the descriptions of classical poets.

Krishna told me that the government planned to set up an electricity plant in this beautiful place and people were protesting against it. I reminded myself that this region was the birth place of many people's movements.

Photographs of martyrs greeted me on the walls of Boddapadu. I felt they were calling me and reminding me of our history. Tears welled up in my eyes. I wiped them and offered red salutes to them. An old man saw this and enquired if I recognised anyone I knew amongst those photographs. I replied, 'They are not just my friends. They are everyone's friends. They struggled for the good of the people. Perhaps this building was constructed to commemorate their services.'

Someone listening to our conversation approached me and said, 'Are you Kondapalli Koteswaramma? We heard the news of your arrival. We still sing the song, *Manadi Telugu deshamamma* that you wrote in 1952 here.' I was pleasantly surprised when he sang the first line, and I continued, *Manadi telugu jaati tallee* (We are the Telugu people). I wanted to sing with him, but could not sing it properly. So I just said a few words and saluted the martyrs again. He told me later that this building had been constructed with voluntary contributions in memory of Subbarao Panigrahi's[83] sacrifice in the temple complex, where he had worked as a priest. I learnt that Panigrahi, who had learnt this song from me in 1955, had taught it to others. I was reminded of the incident when Rajamma and I had sung this song and written it down for the people who had liked it.

I felt fortunate to be able to listen to the song I had written as a tribute to martyrs in this building. My granddaughters and their friends shared my joy.

As we left, those photos on the walls reminded me of Sri Sri's poem:

> Where are the heirs to all these Telugu warriors?
> Where are those snowflakes from yesteryear?
> Where are the traces of time that left its broken golden wings here?

THE LAST PHASE OF A CHEQUERED LIFE

Soon, I became old. I needed a stick to walk with and my body felt the cold in winter. When Sudha came to take me to Visakhapatnam in November 2010, she advised me to start living with them as it would be difficult for me to continue living alone at the old-age home.

The rules of the home did not allow very old people who could not take care of themselves to stay. So I felt it was better to leave now than wait for them to send me away. I paid all my dues there, offered my salutations to Rajeswara Rao's statue outside the home, and came to Visakhapatnam to live with my grandchildren.

I have travelled all over the country as a revolutionary. But I think Visakhapatnam is my last stop now. I want to live here till the end of my life.

This is the city where Raavi Sastry wrote his *Aaru Saaraa Kathalu* (Six Stories around Liquor) and Sri Sri wrote his famous *Maha Prasthanam* (Great Journey to a New World) calling for a new world. This is the place that made KaRa write great Telugu stories, and produced great leaders like Tenneti Viswanatham.[84] It is also a beautiful place that has stimulated creative people. So, I have no regrets about making this my final destination.

My granddaughters, Anuradha and Sudha, and Anuradha's husband are active participants in the Human Rights Forum (HRF). Thus, I occasionally speak to the HRF people. They

always say, 'You are not alone. You are the grandmother of two wonderful women and all of us too.' I am reminded of our house and Karuna's when I witness the discussions that happen here. My granddaughters seem to be following our family tradition.

One day, I was reading the newspaper, when a young man saw me and asked me, 'How old are you? Can you still read without difficulty?'

I replied saying that I had survived ninety years despite the hot summers and cold winters.

He responded, 'Ninety! You should write an autobiography!'

'It is a long story,' I said. 'It is so long that it is impossible to tell it right up to the end. Nor can you listen to it. I will write it down on paper. Read it then.'

'Koteswaramma is like a candle that has burnt at both ends—one side for the country and the other for the revolution,' a friend commented.

'She is the representative of three generations of patriots,' another said.

'She has seen a generation before her and a generation after her, and served as a bridge between the two. People have crossed the bridge and moved on in both directions. Now there is no one and she is a lonely bridge,' my dear friend Somasundar commented.

Thus, I picked 'A Bridge Abandoned' as the title for my autobiography.

Am I not the only one left now as everyone who walked with me has gone away?

Yet, my loneliness does not wish to stay alone in a corner.
It weeps like the river Godavari when it hears of tragic events.
It gets emotional when I think of my revolutionary past.
It wants to preserve our past ideals for future generations.
It derives satisfaction in writing about our past so that the present generation can read it.

This is the story of my life, full of sadness. This is the story that came out of my memories and became 'a bridge abandoned'. This is the story of Kondapalli (the family name that still remains) Koteswaramma's life.

NOTES

1. Bhogaraju Pattabhi Sitaramayya was a freedom fighter and political leader from Andhra Pradesh. He also founded the Andhra Bank in 1923. Kashinathuni Nageswararao Pantulu was also a freedom fighter, as well as a journalist and political activist from Andhra Pradesh. He was the founder of the erstwhile Telugu daily *Andhra Patrika*, the Telugu journal *Bharathi* and also of the pharmaceutical company Amrutanjan. He was known as Desoddharaka.
2. Garimella Satyanarayana was a freedom fighter from Andhra Pradesh. Chilakamarti Lakshmi Narasimham was a famous Telugu novelist, playwright and social reformer. Basavaraju Apparao was a Telugu poet famous for his patriotic songs.
3. Ramakoti is a religious activity in which the devotees write the name of Lord Rama 10 million times.
4. *Firka*s were small revenue blocks consisting of five to ten villages each in British India.
5. A *bindi* is a vermilion dot signifying a woman's marital status.
6. Chandra Rajeswara Rao was a leading freedom fighter and communist leader from Andhra Pradesh. He took active part in the Telangana armed peasants' struggle and, after the party split in 1964, he led the Communist Party of India (CPI) until his death in 1994.
7. Sravana is a month in the Hindu calendar and is considered holy as many festivals fall in this period.
8. Ashada precedes Sravana, but social functions like weddings and housewarmings are not usually undertaken during this month in Andhra Pradesh.
9. In a traditional Hindu wedding, the *kanya daata* is the person who 'gives' his daughter in marriage to the groom.
10. A patriotic song written by the Telugu poet, Gurajada Apparao.
11. *Karra saamu* is a traditional stick-fighting sport in Andhra Pradesh.
12. Kandukuri Veeresalingam was a famous social reformer and writer from Andhra Pradesh.
13. The *gouri vratam* is a religious ritual performed by Hindu women in Andhra Pradesh during the month of Sravana. Married women pray to the goddess Parvathi for the longevity and prosperity of their husbands.

14. Telugu tradition has it that the wife never addresses the husband by name, but uses the term *emandi* to get his attention. It translates roughly as a respectful rendering of 'what do you say [my lord]'.
15. The *malagudem* is a hamlet where people belonging to the Mala caste live.
16. Cow-dung cakes are called *pidakalu* in Telugu. Among other things, they are used as cooking fuel.
17. Bandar College was in Bandar, the colloquial name for the district capital of Machilipatnam, barely 20 km from Pamarru. Bandar was the educational centre of that region in those days.
18. Gudiwada is about 8 km from Pamarru, the nearest town and trade centre. It is also very close to Jonnapadu.
19. Narla Venkateswara Rao was a Telugu journalist and politician.
20. Chandra Savitri Devi, Rajeswara Rao's wife.
21. Raavi Narayanareddy was a communist leader and politician who played a major role in the Telangana armed peasant movement.
22. Dr Komarraju Acchamamba, a doctor by profession, participated actively in the Indian freedom struggle. She was one of the leaders of the armed Telangana peasant movement, who, after the party split in 1964, remained with the CPI. She later served as a Member of Parliament.
23. Sixteen annas made a rupee in that currency.
24. Bezawada is present-day Vijayawada.
25. ChaSo refers to Chaganti Somayajulu, a Telugu writer famous for his poetry and short stories. He belonged to Srikakulam district. Somasundar may have been Avantsa Somasundar.
26. Gidugu Venkata Ramamurthy was a social reformer, historian and linguist. He is known as the father of the colloquial Telugu movement.
27. *Kolatam* or 'stick dance' is one of the popular forms of dance narrative in Andhra Pradesh.
28. Dr Garikapati Rajarao was a Communist Party member who later became a film producer.
29. Shaik Nazar, a Telugu theatre personality famous for performing the *burrakatha*, a narrative entertainment form from Andhra Pradesh.
30. The Telangana movement (1948–51) was an armed revolt of peasants under the leadership of the Communist Party of India against oppressive landlordism patronised by the Nizam of Hyderabad. The revolt started in 1946 in Nalgonda district and quickly spread to all of Telangana in around 4,000 villages. Peasant farmers and labourers revolted against local feudal landlords (jagirdars and deshmukhs) ruling the villages. The communist-led agitation was successful in liberating over 3,000 villages from feudal lords and 10,000 acres of agricultural land was distributed to landless peasants. Around 4,000 peasants lost their lives in the struggle fighting feudal private armies.

31. The Razakars were a private military organised by Qasim Razvi, who headed the Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen.
32. I don't remember whose courier Moolpuri Koteswara Rao (Angalooru), the man who accompanied me, was.
33. Lakshmi Perumallu was an actor from the Praja Natya Mandali, who had played the role of Dada in *Maa Bhoomi*.
34. This was a popular Telugu poem by the great revolutionary poet Sri Sri. The term 'juggernaut' is an anglicisation of this image of Jagannatha's chariot.
35. Rao Balasaraswathi, a famous Telugu singer and actress from the 1930s to 1960s.
36. The *mangalasutram* is a sacred chain worn as a symbol of marriage by Indian women. Other symbols include a chain of black beads and toe rings.
37. This would approximately have been the period 1949–50. The Northern Circars was the term used in colonial India for the area between the coastal districts of the Godavari in AP and Ganjam in Orissa.
38. A lathi is a long, thick and hard cane used by the police. The 'lathi charge' was a famous colonial police attack term that continues to be in use today.
39. Rammohan Rao heads Navodaya, a leading Telugu publishing house.
40. Rayavellur is now Vellore in Tamil Nadu.
41. In 1941, Kumaramangalam was arrested along with P. Ramamurthi, C.S. Subramaniam and R. Umanath for distributing seditious pamphlets in what came to be known as the Madras Conspiracy Case. Mohan Kumaramangalam was born in 1916 in London to the *zamindar* of Kumaramangalam in Salem district and who later became chief minister of Madras Presidency. He was educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge, where he was deeply influenced by communism. He was called to the bar from the Inner Temple, and returned to India in 1939 to participate in the independence movement. At the start of the 1960s, he began distancing himself from communism and joined the Congress in 1967. Loyal to Indira Gandhi, he served as minister of steel and mines from 1971 until his death in 1973.
42. Palaniappan was a special deputy superintendent of police of Krishna district in the late 1940s, who was instrumental in the mass arrests of communists.
43. Shripad Amrit Dange, a founding member of the Communist Party of India. Ajoy Kumar Ghosh, a prominent communist leader, was leading the party when the Indo-China war happened.

44. Kishan was the underground name of Ravi Narayana Reddy, a Telangana-based leader of the Communist Party. The Kishan Document is the name of the draft he circulated, proposing to give up the armed struggle.
45. Nanduri Subbarao, a Telugu poet famous for the work *Enki Paatalu* (Songs of Enki).
46. Tandra Paparayudu was the general of the kingdom of Bobbili, who fought the French in the Battle of Bobbili (1757). He was referred to as 'Bobbili Puli' (Tiger of Bobbili), in recognition of his bravery.
47. A place near Vijayawada, now part of the city.
48. Indrakiladri is a hill in Vijayawada famous for its Durga temple.
49. Sunkara Satyanarayana was a famous playwright and lyricist.
50. Pedda Kamma is a sub-caste among the Kammas who claim to be superior. The word *pedda* means big, great, elder or most experienced, depending on the context.
51. Gurram Jashuva is a Telugu poet famous for his works like *Firadausi* and *Gabbilam*.
52. The magazine of the Communist Party.
53. Unnava Lakshmi Narayana was a popular Telugu writer. Gudavalli Ramabrahmam was a Telugu film director known for his social movies made during the 1930s and 1940s.
54. The Vijayanagar empire refers to the dynasty that was based at Hampi in northern Karnataka. Vizianagaram refers to the region and kingdom that was in the northern coastal district bordering Orissa. The literary analogy is between these two regions.
55. Gouthu Lacchanna was a freedom fighter and a Congress leader espousing the cause of the backward classes.
56. Tapi Dharma Rao was a noted writer and a leading communist.
57. Gajjela Mallareddy was a progressive Telugu poet.
58. The *burrakatha* is one of the most popular folk art forms of Andhra Pradesh. Originally, the form involved the singing of epic poems (now the theme is often a social issue) by the main performer, who uses the *burra*, a musical string instrument with a hollow shell. He or she is accompanied by a chorus of two other performers, who generally use small cymbals to mark the beat. The *burrakatha*, while essentially telling a story, also has prayers, solo drama, dance, songs, poems and jokes. The Indian epics, originally in Sanskrit, were also made accessible to the masses through such art forms in simple Telugu.
59. A *mandal* is an administrative unit below the district and above the village.
60. Satyamurthy, a school teacher and legendary poet, who wrote under the name of Sivasagar, was a leader of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist)

Maoist group, along with Sitaramayya, and was secretary of its central committee between 1982 and 1984. He left the party in 1990 and later publicly espoused the Dalit cause.

61. Neelam Rajasekhar Reddy, an important leader in the Communist Party was also the brother of ex-president of India, Sanjeeva Reddy. Tarimela Nagi Reddy was another important Communist Party leader who, after 1967, formed his own group, inspired by Naxalbari.
62. A veteran communist who worked on the history of both Andhra Pradesh and the Communist movement in the area, and wrote pioneering works.
63. Nyayapathi Raghava Rao and Nyayapathi Kameswari were a husband-and-wife team who wrote extensively for children in Telugu and conducted radio programmes on All India Radio for them. They were known affectionately as Radio Annayya and Radio Akkayya.
64. Tripuraneni Gopichand was a Telugu short-story writer, novelist, editor, essayist, playwright and film director.
65. Sarada Srinivasan was a popular radio star.
66. MLA quarters refers to the accommodation provided to the members of the Legislative Assembly, many of whom came to Hyderabad from other towns of AP when the assembly was in session.
67. Bhagavatula Sadasiva Shankara Sastry, known as Arudra, was a noted Telugu writer who went on to write lyrics and dialogues for Telugu films.
68. Radhakka left Krishna later and married Chandra Pulla Reddy, the leader of an important faction of the Naxalites. After his death, she led another splinter group.
69. Tarimela Nagi Reddy, a veteran communist leader and MLA, left the CPM in 1968 to form the Andhra Pradesh Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries along with Devulapalli Venkateswara Rao and Kolla Venkaiah. This group was known as the TN group colloquially. Nagi Reddy is also noted for his Telugu book, *Takatlo Bharatadesham*, which described the India of those times.
70. Charu Majumdar, a veteran communist leader, led the breakaway faction from the CPM in 1967 and formed the CPI (ML) in 1969.
71. Bhogi is celebrated by the people of coastal Andhra the day before Pongal (Sankranti), the harvest festival. Berries *(ber/regipandlu)*, petals, coins and consecrated rice are laid out in a plate, which is then held in both hands and taken in a slow circle around the child's head, after which the contents are poured gently on its head.
72. Sri Sri was the pen name of Srirangam Srinivasa Rao, the legendary Telugu poet, who was attracted to communism and inspired a whole

generation of youth with his revolutionary poetry. He also worked in the Madras film industry, writing scripts and lyrics.

73. This was one of the first conspiracy cases in Andhra Pradesh to be filed against the Naxalites. It was heard by a special sessions court in Visakhapatnam and had more than a hundred famous Naxalite leaders, including Kanu Sanyal, Charu Majumdar, Souren Bose and Kondapalli Sitaramayya, as accused. The case was so special and the number of accused so large, all of them important leaders, that a court hall was built inside the Vizag jail itself.
74. Maddukuri Chandrasekhar Rao, also known as Chandram, was a prominent leader of the CPI and also editor of its magazine, *Navashakti*.
75. Kannabiran was a prominent lawyer, particularly associated with the civil liberties movement.
76. The Tarkunde Committee, headed by former High Court Justice Tarkunde, was an independent commission formed in April 1977 to enquire into Naxalite deaths in police encounters in Andhra Pradesh during the Emergency years. It concluded that at least nineteen of these were cold-blooded murders.
77. Rajan's story was told in a film *Piravi* (The Birth), which went on to win thirty-one awards, including one at the Cannes Film Festival in 1989.
78. Professor Chekuri Rama Rao retired from the Department of Linguistics, Osmania University, Hyderabad. He is noted not just as a critical linguist, but also as a literary critic.
79. Abburi Ramakrishna Rao was an eminent litterateur and mentored several writers and poets.
80. This wry Telugu proverb is a statement on the way in which something with the most wondrous qualities is never valued at home. The Hindi rendering is *Ghar ki murgi dal barabar* (The chicken cooked at home is nothing more than a bland dal). The castor, mentioned in the heading of this section, is a hardy plant which thrives where it is not wanted. The author uses the metaphor of this weed-like survivor to describe her feelings of rejection and tenacious survival.
81. Kalipatnam Rama Rao, known as KaRa Mastaru (called Mastaru because he had been a teacher), is a noted novelist and short story writer, also a member of the radical Virasam. He started Katha Nilayam in 1997, a research centre and library to help preserve Telugu literature for subsequent generations. He belongs to Srikakulam district.
82. Just as English stories for children end, 'They all lived happily ever after', Telugu stories used to end in this fashion.
83. Subbarao Panigrahi, a famous poet whose song and verse became the vehicle of radical politics in Andhra Pradesh, had come from Kharagpur

to live in Sompeta in Srikakulam. A small Shiva temple in Boddapadu needed a priest and, in 1958, he was encouraged by the Communist Party to fill this opening. It was here that Panigrahi started his journey as poet, cultural activist and revolutionary organiser. He was shot by police in 1969.

84. Visakhapatnam was home to many talented and revolutionary Telugu writers like Raavi Sastry, Kalipatnam Rama Rao and Sri Sri, and freedom fighters like Tenneti Viswanatham.

A Word from the Author

The Telugu version of *Nirjana Vaaradhi* came out in 2012 August. It was launched in a meeting put together by Vemana Vasantha Lakshmi, Gita Ramaswamy and my grandchildren, Anuradha and Sudha. They invited several social workers to the event and organised it with enthusiasm and responsibility.

Elders like Chekuri Ramarao, Paruchuri Hanumantharao and A.B.K. Prasad had read the manuscript thoroughly. Women revolutionaries and writers like Mallu Swarajyam, Vimala, Volga, Manjari and Rama Melkote read from the book and talked about it at the launch. This created interest in the attendees about the book.

The books that were put on sale at Hyderabad Book Trust were sold out in no time. The Telugu writer, Abburi Chayadevi, who lives in Chandra Rajeswararao Old Age Home, procured two copies of the book and gave one copy to the reading room of their home. She read it and spoke to me about it. I learnt that she had recommended it to her friends and fellow writers, P. Satyavathi and Indraganti Janakibala.

When P. Satyavathi enquired about the book at Navodaya Book House, it was already sold out there. Eventually, Rammohan Rao gave her his personal copy.

Janakibala too obtained a copy of the book and read it. She spoke to me later and commented about the underrepresentation of women's biographies and autobiographies in our literature. She felt that most of the existing works were about the women who participated in the independence movement and very little about women communists. She said she hoped there would be more such books in the future.

Apart from famous writers, other people also started calling to congratulate me. Not knowing how to get in touch me, several people contacted Gita Ramaswamy's office and the newspaper office where Vasantha Lakshmi worked. Despite their busy schedules, they gave my contact details to people who wanted to talk to me.

I came to know that second and third editions of the book had arrived by December 2012. I was surprised to see such a response for an autobiography and was happy to receive all the phone calls.

Some people who worked with the Communist Party and its exemplary leaders in its heyday read the book and wanted to meet me. Since they were now old, their children suggested them to speak to me on phone instead. I became emotional when they talked to me, saying, 'We offer a red salute to you for writing your autobiography.' I also gave a red salute back, wiping my tears.

Namini Subramanyam Nayudu, who earned a lot of fame for his book *Pacchanaku Sakshiga*, got my contact details through Vasantha Lakshmi and said to me, 'I read your story with tears pouring down my face. People of all ideologies should read this. I want to meet you in person.'

I replied, 'I don't know much about political ideologies and literature. You can tell me what you know when we meet.'

He sent a copy of the book to Rajyalakshmi, who was a lecturer at Padmavathi College. She read the book and said, 'We read about your ideals and dreams in the book. But we want to hear in person. If you can come to Tirupathi, I want to organise a meeting there and felicitate you.' I told her about my inability to attend even the book launch that happened in Hyderabad earlier. Rajyalakshmi suggested that the book would have been a sensation in the state had it arrived two years earlier. I was reminded of Mahidhara Rammohan Rao who had initially suggested to me to write my story.

Likewise, some more people wanted to meet me in person to discuss the book. Some of them are: Chelikani Ramarao's son Comrade Stalin, CPI party secretary Comrade Narayana, writer Dasari Amarendra, revolutionary writer Varavararao and his wife Hema, CPM leader Punyavathi, writer Malliswari, Chetana Mahila Sangham's founder Padma, writer Kalipatnam Ramarao and Sahitya Academy's secretary Avula Manjulatha.

I was reminded of my days as a revolutionary as I sat with my readers and reminisced about the book. We all spoke enthusiastically about those times. Nagalla Rajeswaramma's name popped up in our discussion. She was one of the founders of Krishna District Mahila Sangham and belonged to Katuru village, which was known as 'Andhra Moscow' in those days. She affectionately called me 'sister'. I asked Punyavathi about her whereabouts.

'She is also still a revolutionary at heart, despite her advanced age. Some comrade was distributing your autobiography at Sundarayya's centenary celebrations recently. She got a copy of the book there. She couldn't read it herself but made someone else read it out for her and felt happy.' Punyavathi also gave me Rajeswaramma's contact details.

I told my granddaughter about our relationship and asked her to call Rajeswaramma. As I heard her call me 'sister' on phone, I felt as if she put her kind hand on my head. 'Hearing about your tragic life brought tears to my eyes. You poured your heart out in the pages of history. Although none of us could give you solace, you found it in literature. I am happy that you did what none of us managed to do [write]'. As she said these words, she became emotional and expressed a desire to see me in person.

Her daughter Jyothi spoke with me afterwards: 'Amma appears tired. She should not talk so much now. She said several times that she wanted to meet you. If you too want to meet her, I can send a car to your house so that you can come here. I am a doctor, so I can take care you while you are here.'

I informed my granddaughter about Jyothi's proposal. 'You may not be able to endure the journey. Its not wrong to have a desire to meet but some wishes cannot be fulfilled,' she replied. I felt as if old age is a curse as I heard these words. I consoled myself thinking that at least my age still cooperates for reading and writing, if not travelling.

My granddaughter looked at my sad face and said, 'You can speak to her whenever you want. I can dial her number for you and keep the phone by your side.' I thought of the phone as a kind friend that lets two distant friends speak to each other. It struggles day and night to keep relationships alive. It is the friend of all friends.

It became a daily routine for me to receive calls through my friend, the phone. If it does not ring for two days, I think that it was taking a rest.

Perhaps it understands my wait. It rang one day and I picked the call and enquired who it was. 'My name is Tilak. I belong to Yalaparru village in Krishna district. I work in New Delhi now. Jampala Choudary, who stays in the USA, organised a teleconference to introduce your book. They showed how Telugus all over the world reacted to this book. I assume you and your granddaughters too saw this. I saw the show. Your life story shook up the state and reached America. I think it should be translated to other languages.' He spoke for a long time like this and promised to meet me when he came to Visakhapatnam next.

Thus, my friend, the phone, kept ringing occasionally. One day, it informed me about a call from a few women. I wondered if this was from America too, but when I picked up, they said, 'We studied in Kakinada Polytechnic College and lived in the hostel where you worked. We used to call you "aunty". Do you remember us?' This call made me happy again. 'We saw your photo on your book cover while browsing the Internet and recognised you.' They recollected incidents from our past. 'Since your son was an engineer and daughter

a doctor, we thought you would not be staying longer in the hostel. We learnt from the book that you lived in an old-age home for sometime and are with your grandchildren now. We are now well settled in America and would like to support you if possible.'

I felt both happy and sad seeing their affection. I thought about my past life. I thanked them for the offer and told them to call once in a while and that would suffice. They said they wanted to visit me. I welcomed the idea as I too wanted to see them.

Another day, my friend rang again. I calmly picked the call. 'I am a Telugu person from Palnadu and I am a business man in America now. My name is Julakanti Sreenivasareddy,' said a voice.

'How do you know me?' I asked him.

'A friend told me about the book via the Internet. I don't usually read books, but I read yours and shed tears about your tragic story. I ordered a few more copies through Gita Ramaswamy-*garu* and got your contact details from her. I want to give these copies to a library. I want to send ten thousand rupees in my grandmother's name, as a token of appreciation.'

'Your admiration is much more valuable than the money,' I said. 'That is sufficient.' But he insisted that I should accept the money, making him and his grandmother's soul happy. Before I could reply, he said he would come to Visakhapatnam to meet me in person and hung up.

I received another call a day later. I thought this was also from America, but it was from Guntur. Advocate Cherukuri Satyanarayana was calling me. I remembered that he had distributed copies of the book at Sundarayya's birth centenary celebrations. 'I read your life story,' he said. 'You showed a lot of restraint by not mentioning the name of the person who caused you so much of agony. I noticed the love and affection you have for all those leaders of the past who worked with

commitment for the welfare of people. I think you should write more on people like Tarimela Nagireddy. I can publish your future work.'

'I wish my health cooperates like you in writing further,' I replied. 'You have a noble thought. I wish you all the best.'

Padma, who had participated in the revolutionary movements and continued working for the people by building a Chetana Mahila Sangham, read *Nirjana Vaaradhi* and we became friends later. 'You couldn't go to Tirupathi for a meeting about your book. We are planning to organise one in Visakhapatnam on behalf of our organisation, introducing your book and felicitating you on that ocassion.' She added jokingly, 'We will pick you from your house and lift you to the dais if necessary.' Thus, she convinced me to attend the meeting.

They requested me to talk about the 1953 Uttarandhra elections for which we had campaigned. They introduced the book to the audience and the meeting was conducted very well. It received a huge applause from the audience.

Later, a friend came to visit me. 'Your autobiography was read by thousands of people,' he said. 'A lot of people praised you by phone or by meeting you in person. There are also some critics of the book. Have you heard their comments?' I replied that I had not.

'First, people have criticised that you expressed dissatisfaction that nobody came for Sitaramayya's funeral from his own party. Second, some think that you did not mention the name of the woman who lived with Sitaramayya as you are worried about your reputation.' The answers to these comments can be seen in the book itself, if seen from a open perspective. If you want to criticise, you may not notice them.

I answered my friend at length: 'When Sitaramayya died, I wondered if I should attend his final rites. He is a revolutionary who sacrificed everything he had for the sake of the movement. I thought I should attend the funeral for that reason at least.

I did not see anyone from his political party there. Perhaps, they did not think like I did about attending the funeral.

'Political differences can sometimes elicit inhuman responses from people. I was reminded of the incident where we all refused to talk to Dr Acchamamba despite her attempts to talk to us, knowing very well that we were hurting her. She delivered our babies like a mother. She encouraged us and helped us during the revolutionary struggle. Why did we behave like this with her? Our thoughts about her back then reminded of the communist parties that are now criticising each other and fighting with one another.

'Memories of Sitaramayya's May Day call on the streets of Gudiwada for all workers to unite came back to me. Thinking of all these things and wondering which of the seven or eight communist parties prevalent today would solve the problems of the society and give us assurance, I paid my respects to his body that day.

'I did not think of my reputation when I decided to not reveal the name of the woman who lived with Sitaramayya. Nor did I criticise her or hate the party for what had happened. I wrote my autobiography with my friends' encouragement with the aim of making it informative and thought provoking for readers.'

I may have forgotten to mention the names of a few more people who congratulated me personally between September 2012 to June 2014. I apologise for that and thank everyone once again.

Remembering Sundarayya's words—'You should live on. The country today needs people who won't harm it. If you do something for the country, it will be for its good. So, you should live'—I salute him now. I think writing this autobiography is the best thing I did in this last phase of my life.

Kondapalli Koteswaramma